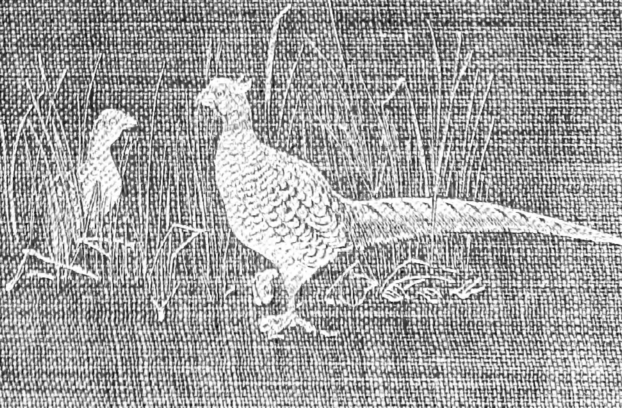
Ten Years of Game-Keeping

Owen Jones



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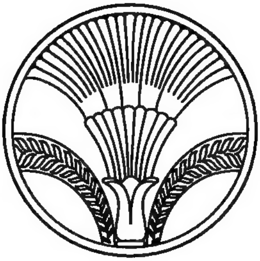

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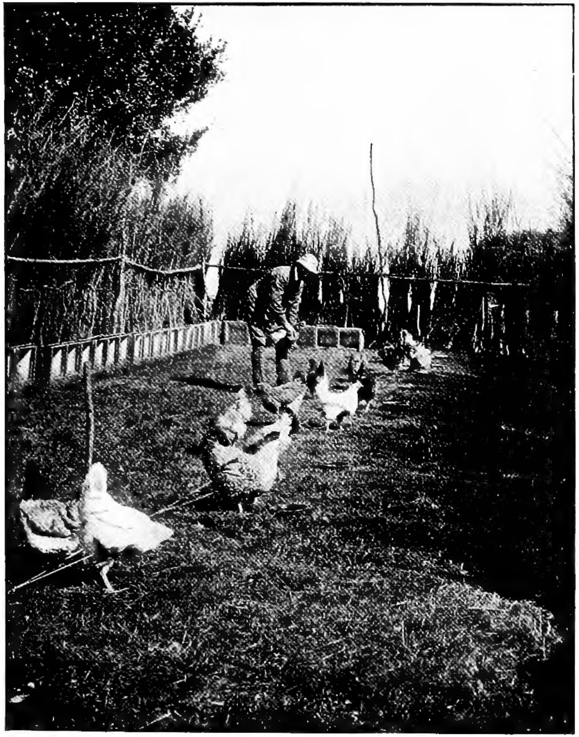
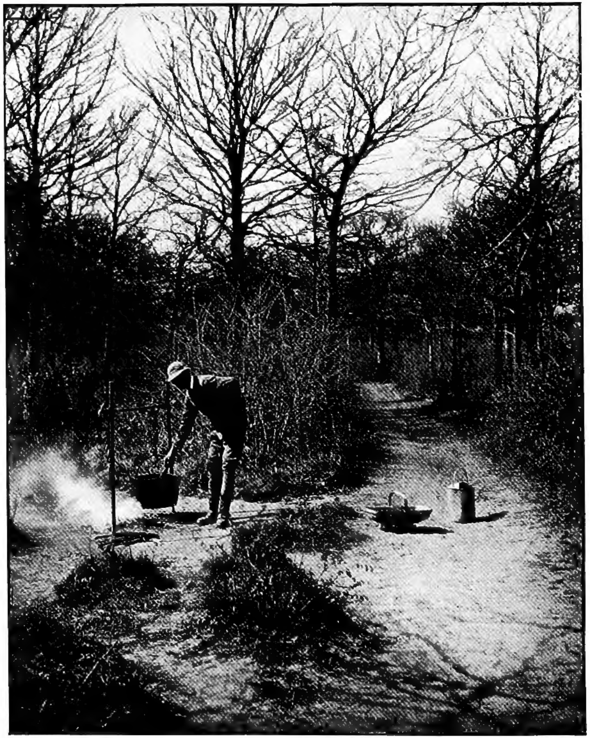


Tethering the sitting hens.



The keeper's kitchen.

TEN YEARS
OF GAME-KEEPING

BY

OWEN JONES
'GAMEKEEPER'

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

THIRD IMPRESSION

LONDON
EDWARD ARNOLD
1910

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PREFACE

It occurred to me that to become a gamekeeper was the only way of mastering the subject of game and shooting, and the thousand and one details connected with a gamekeeper's craft and duties—that it was also a way of avoiding a conventional calling, of enjoying sport combined with woodcraft, of earning enough to keep body and soul together, and, above all, of obtaining first-hand experience which would enable me to write from the triple view-point of sportsman, naturalist, and gamekeeper.

When I became a gamekeeper, I did so in real earnest, taking the rough with the smooth, the kicks with the ha'pence.

After these long years as a working keeper (not merely a steward or overseer of others), I have a large stock of material for books, of which this is a forerunner. That the book mainly concerns myself and my adventures must be my apology for many 'I's.'

To a few, I hope, it will bring a whiff of woods and fields, a remembrance of rain-drops on autumn leaves, and, maybe, a vision of many a sporting day spent in the company of those excellent fellows, my brother keepers.

O. J.

September, 1909.

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TEN YEARS OF GAME-KEEPING

CHAPTER I

HOW I BECAME A KEEPER

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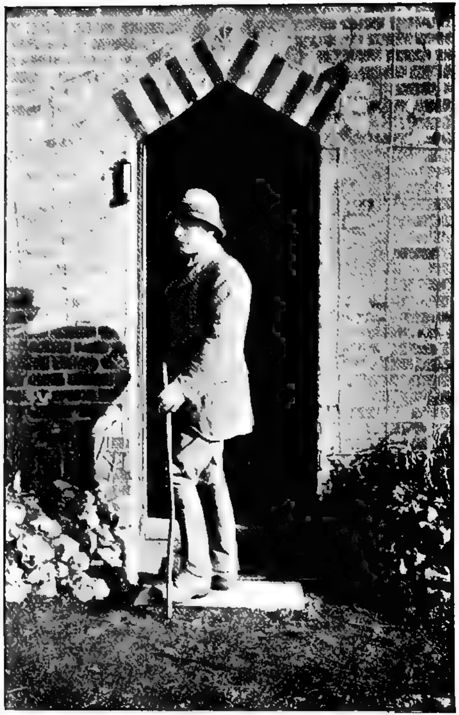
So soon as I could run I acquired a determined love for rabbits, and acquired also the most disappointing proof that they could run faster than I could. For all that, my sister and I persevered heroically, encouraged by the suggestion of our nurse that the placing of salt on a rabbit's tail would insure our catching it. To live for ever in a shepherd's hut in a field of rape, to which thousands of pigeons flocked, was one of our childish schemes. We thought in those sanguine days that we could make, not only a living, but a fortune, by shooting pigeons and selling those we could not eat. To miss a pigeon seemed impossible, then. Of poachers we talked with awe by day, and by night had horribly exciting dreams. One autumn day my sister, brother, and I hit on the idea of running home, shrieking that we had been attacked by poachers, and my brother's flaxen locks were freely anointed with crushed blackberries to lend colour to our story. On another occasion we three spied a mistle-thrush's nest in an oak in a plantation. I can still recall that sunny spot, an ideal one for a pheasant's nest. Unfortunately, just as my brother had climbed nearly to the nest the keeper spied us. And how we ran! We did a record half-mile home, where we hid among the faggots in the wood-shed. And it was a long time before we ventured forth, though we knew that a dinner was awaiting us that included a jam roly-poly. We imagined that at least we should be cast indefinitely into prison. That terrible keeper is living still, and whenever I see him we have a laugh over those old adventurous days.

I grew up in an atmosphere of dogs, traps, and guns. My father had a small shoot, which produced chiefly partridges, hares, and a few pheasants and rabbits; and on this shoot I spent most of my time that was not taken up with things more important than sport. At every opportunity I sought the society of the keepers in the neighbourhood of my home, accompanied them on their rounds, and spent many happy days with them, ferreting, in the winter holidays. The art of trapping simply fascinated me.

Ferrets that a few seconds before were furiously ratting.

My old retriever.



Full-dress uniform.

And how I envied the keeper his life and his pound a week! Then I saw only the bright side of the calling; I knew nothing of its ruggedness, its ups and downs, its constant worries, its bitter disappointments and quiet joys. Little did I think that one day my boyish dreams were to be fulfilled, even to living on less than a pound a week.

My first attempt at firing a gun came about in this way: My brother and I purloined a cartridge, withdrew the charge, and reloaded the case on a very small scale. We then shut ourselves in the harness-room, to reduce the risk of detection, placed an empty tin on the mantelpiece, and, after much discussion, hesitation, and blinking of eyes, I loosed off. What a fright we had! for the shot rebounded on to us pretty smartly. However, we were tremendously proud of a dent in that tin. We were allowed soon after this to amuse ourselves with a pair of old muzzle-loaders and—caps only—and with these we blew out tremendous bags of candles. Then we would hold mimic shooting-parties. My sister represented the beaters; the shrubs were our coverts; blackbirds and thrushes our pheasants; the smaller birds our partridges; the household cat, often much against her will, was made to act the part of a hare; and we imagined an occasional woodcock. After I was thirteen I shot a good deal, doing my share towards proving that it was possible to hit a driven partridge.

But there arose the question of what I should do. There was an opportunity to enter the Bank of England, and I might have gone into the Church, with a fair prospect of becoming a Minor Canon. And there are many people still living who do not realize how thankful they should be that I became eventually a slayer of vermin, and not a doctor. Rebelling against all that meant town life—to me what caged existence must be to a wild bird—I decided to take the chance that came along, though, strictly speaking, it did not come along, because I went after it. I began at fifteen shillings a week—not a princely salary, but by careful management I lived on it. And by careful management I mean that the expenditure literally of every halfpenny required consideration. Still, of the three good things of life, I enjoyed health and happiness, and I felt quite rich when I got a rise of three shillings a week. I have not the smallest regret that I plunged into the game-keeping life. At first, naturally, I found its unfathomed waters somewhat like a cold bath on a winter morning. But whether it be a first attempt at game-keeping or a morning dip in winter that is accomplished successfully, there follows a glow of satisfaction.

To provide shooting for others, I quickly found, called for skill more complex and interesting than to fire many successful shots myself. Occasionally, when at a sporting beat the shooting has been execrable, I would feel—well, how could I help feeling otherwise? Whatever may have been my successes in other directions, from first to last I was a hopeless failure at touching my cap, or my hair, or my forehead, or whatever a keeper is supposed to touch with that Jack-in-the-box movement of a finger. Though I was scrupulously polite to those who were my superiors for the time being, I confess that I never tried very hard to master the finger trick: it always seemed to me so suggestive of a tip. A man must be prepared to ignore absolutely his own friends and relations while on duty—that is to say, in the presence of his employer or his guests. I made it an inflexible rule never to presume in any way, or to take the least advantage of the thought that in private life I was perhaps not greatly inferior to those with whom I sometimes was brought into official contact.

The best start on the game-keeping road for a man outside the ordinary recruiting ranks is a course of instruction on a game-farm, because, should he discover that, after all, he would rather not pursue the attempt further, he can give it up, and resume his former social position without let or hindrance: he has been only a pupil on a game-farm. But when once he has become a real keeper, worn livery, and taken any tips he is so lucky as to have offered him—well, that might be another thing altogether to those who fear the bunkers of conventionality. Another reason for suggesting an apprenticeship on a game-farm is that a man can learn thereon in the quickest way the art—and the drudgery—of pheasant-rearing; and in these days of gluttonous shooting a knowledge of the hand-rearing of pheasants is indispensable to a game-keeper's education. Look at the advertisements of keepers seeking berths. In nine cases out of ten you will see words to this effect: 'Thoroughly experienced in the management of aviaries and the rearing of pheasants.' If a man who applied for a post were known to be well up in other branches of a keeper's craft, but lacked knowledge of pheasant-rearing, what would be his chance of getting the ordinary berth? Pheasant-rearing, after all is said and done, means only an advanced knowledge of chicken-rearing. But it is in his other duties that a keeper has the best opportunity to show skill, judgment, tact, power of observation, and ability to organize and to lead—the likely fruits of a good education.

A head-keeper has far more responsibility than most people imagine. Naturally, he expects to bear the blame for his own mistakes; but, as a matter of fact, he is held responsible for the negligence, stupidity, carelessness, or ignorance of his subordinates, and even of his employer. The conduct of his first shooting-party, as commander-in-chief, is an ordeal by fire, and many a keeper could testify that it has proved so in a literal sense. In theory it may be easy enough to plan out the arrangements for a day's shooting, but to carry them out free from hitch is quite otherwise. Think of the distracting surroundings! Guns are wanting to know where to go in a way that suggests that so long as they are all right, nothing else matters; someone whom you have never seen before, whose name you do not even know, is asking where 'my' cartridges are; while another is repeating that he knows a bird is dead, and though he vouchsafes no further information, gives the impression that he will not be too well pleased if a search-party be not organized forthwith. If you order the beaters to move on by themselves to the next beat, often they lose themselves or blunder horribly.

Without the unnecessary worryings to which usually he is subjected a keeper has quite enough details to think of all the time; and not one of them must be forgotten, or a whole day's sport may be ruined.

CHAPTER II

ON A PARTRIDGE BEAT

My first beat—The farmer—'Enry the carter—His brother-in-law's rabbit-shooting and mine—A novel puncture—A good ratting ferret—End of a poaching cat—Foxes—I catch egg-stealers—Gipsies—Egg trickery and gratuitous advice.

My first regular keepering job was to look after partridge ground. I had the sole charge of it—and the sole responsibility; so that whatever of blame or credit was to be had, I knew I should be liable to full measure. I was standing at one and the same time on the lowest and the topmost rungs of the game-keeping ladder. Possibly I should not have got the job at all if partridges then had been thought of as highly as they are now.

The process of moving into my official residence produced no exciting incident. Probably the most valuable piece of furniture was my gun—certainly it was the most treasured. The item of that day of moving which has left the most vivid recollection was the first meal in my game-keeping abode. There had been no time for midday indulgence, so I was treated to a meat tea, the chief dish of which was a savoury hash of pork and onions, and I enjoyed it probably as much as did Esau the price of his birthright.

For the first year we had the front part of an old farmhouse—two rooms, a large general-purpose outhouse (formerly the dairy), with a third of the garden. This accommodation, as is the custom with keepers, was part of my wages. The rent in any case would not have been more than eighteenpence a week; still, even that would have made a big hole in my fifteen shillings a week.

My domain consisted of about a thousand acres in the north of Hampshire, my native county. Unfortunately, it did not all lie in one block: one part, some two hundred and fifty acres, was a mile away from the rest. As some set-off to this disadvantage, I lived about half-way between the two. The lie of the larger portion was fairly open, and the soil light. It was intersected by four by-roads, which crossed near the centre, and one side was bounded by a turnpike. The fields were big and the hedges few; with the exception of four, all the hedges were low, so that a considerable panoramic view was to be had from most points.

The prospects certainly were not very encouraging, since the biggest bag for one day during the preceding season was six and a half brace. This may have been due to a variety of causes other than proportionate scarcity of birds. I knew that in the memory of living men the shoot had yielded three to four hundred brace a season. Six and a half brace set no impossible standard; at any rate, I could not bring about a result much worse.

Since I was more or less familiar with the smaller portion of my ground, my first act of game-keeping was to make, on the morning following my removal, a long tour of inspection over the main portion, which was one big farm. I encountered a farmer, of whom I took special stock, knowing full well that much depended on how we got on together. I saw at once that he was a consequential sort of man, and evidently under the impression that he understood most other things as well as he did farming. He had a large family, which when I ceased my connection with his farm apparently had come to a conclusion at five brace. Small wonder that his manner was somewhat autocratic when dealing with outsiders! He struck me as being just the sort of man who, with a little more practical knowledge of the requirements of game and a little more tact, would have been an ideal farmer in a keeper's eyes. He told his men in the most truculent tone, which made me want to blush, that he had let his shooting, and 'if e'er a one on ye gets slippin' down wires or anyways playin' the fool, off you goes to gaol, mind, sharp!'

He possessed the most scrupulous reverence for hospitality in a liquid form, and at our first interview lodged a petition that I would not fail to test the resources of his cellar whenever I felt inclined. Unfortunately, he stocked only beer, milk, and spirits, liquids I love not; so that, though I was often thirsty, I had to forgo what was a pleasure to him to give. I could not convince him that it was possible for tastes to differ. He regarded it as a solemn rite to drink with a guest, and he never failed to say, '’Ere's luck!'

A man of very uncertain temper, he was much given to sudden sackings of his men, though he never allowed the sun to go down upon his wrath. The sacked one would come, as bidden, to the farm-house, and say that he wanted to see the 'ma-aster,' who would appear, looking very much surprised to see the man, and ask:

'Well, So-and-so, what do *you* want?'

'Please, I be come for my money—the same as you told I,' the man would answer, in an injured tone.

'Then in the marnin' you'd better take and start scarifyin' they vallers in Pink's Carner wi' old Vilet and Jew'l.' (*Aside*: 'Draw ’Enry a drop o' beer.') Good-night, ’Enry.'

These are a fair sample of the words in which he would complete a sacking.

This ’Enry was the head-carter, and he had been sacked and reinstated times without number. He boasted that he could rely on having a 'smartish set-to' during the sowing of corn, haymaking, and harvest, with 'a few odd uns throw'd in, like.' Whenever there arrived an addition to the farmer's family, the carter, who declared the event marked the time for sowing 'wutts' (oats), was invited to a private view, and, of course, to offer a libation. The ceremony over, he would retire more or less in the direction of his cottage, repeating: ''Tis a right down fine youngster, an' no mistake! Don't know as ever I see'd a finer. . . .' On the ninth occasion of this sort he felt that his customary eulogy was not justified, and turned to the fond mother and said: 'I'm blow'd if I don't pretty near think this un's the darl* !'

My instructions were that the Ground Game Act was to be a dead-letter so far as hares were concerned, and that, in return, the shooting tenant undertook to get down the rabbits, and to keep them down. There was one small covert of six acres, in which there were only a few rabbits; but on the other side of the farm were three dells, holding strong colonies. Luckily, since it was well on in the spring, these dells were fairly free from herbage and undergrowth, so I was able to deal with the rabbits with ferrets and gun; and by spending the best part of a day at each dell, I made a highly appreciated reduction in the number of the rabbits. On one occasion I had been digging for a ferret, but found when I got to where it should have been that it had left the rabbit, and gone, as proved to be the case, in pursuit of another. Leaving my brand-new keeper's coat where I had thrown it down before beginning to dig, I nipped up to the spot where my gun was, from which I could command all exits from the dell. Scarcely had I reached it, when out dashed an old buck, and tore round the side of the dell like the wind. Bang! and he turned a masterly somersault. On going to pick up that rabbit—and my coat—I found that about a hundred pellets had provided ventilation for my left arm. When I got home everyone, seeing the state of my sleeve, wasted sympathy on my *poor* arm. I thanked them, and said I felt very thankful that it was not my right arm. This reminds me that not long afterwards I punctured one of my bicycle tyres in a rather original way. I had left the machine leaning against the outside of the wood while I went round to try and get a shot at a rabbit. I came up a track which went through the covert, looked cautiously outside, made sure I saw a rabbit, and fired. When I went to pick it up, I not only discovered no rabbit, but that I had to walk the three miles home, pushing my bicycle.

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* The last.

But to return to the rabbits in the dells: By means of bunnies of all sizes and conditions, I was able to provide the farm-hands with several rounds of rabbit 'pudd'n,' and thus got a useful start on the road to their hearts. The head-carter was so touched that he confided to me that his brother-in-law could ''andle a gun jest about,' and that the year before, during the cutting of a piece of 'carn over against yonder beechen belt,' he had shot no fewer than seven rabbits in succession. The setting of so high a standard made me feel a bit nervous for my own reputation, till I discovered that the aforesaid brother-in-law had waited till each rabbit stopped and 'set up.' He simply ignored those that did not stop to 'set up,' or did not 'set up' long enough for him to align his piece. However, it was not long before I blotted out the brother-in-law's record. It was on the occasion of the cutting of some rye-grass. I felt like burying my head in a hare-pocket when 'Enry, the head-carter (he of the 'wutts' and 'darls'), told his mates that 'he was blest if ever in all 'is life he'd seen sich a feller to shoot. Whether they be a-runnin' strite or caperin' like bla-azes all over the shop, he do jest about cocksteddle 'em over—there b'ain't no mistake about that.'

Of course, I had lost no time in making the acquaintance of the famous brother-in-law. There might be wrinkles to be gained, I thought, even from a man who shot seven 'set-up' rabbits in succession. Another thing: he had permission to take a gun with him to work, for the purpose of scaring rooks and pigeons, and shooting any of them he could. He was rather beyond the middle of life, and his manner implied that he was quite cunning enough for his years. In his youth, he said, he had been in the army, and that beneath the back of his trousers was evidence of a sabre-slash, while it was another wound, he vowed, that caused him to speak as if he had a perpetual stomach-ache. His gun certainly appeared to have been made about the time of the Crimean War. The one barrel of the weapon was bound with string, though, he assured me, 'she was as safe as a church, and shot turr'ble 'ard if you didn't 'urry 'er.' On condition that he drew the charge and reloaded her in my presence, I one evening volunteered to try to shoot the old chap a rabbit—not, as he explained, that he was over-fond of rabbits, but merely that he 'didn't mind the hind leg of one now an' t'an for a change.' I had an easy crossing shot at about five-and-twenty yards, and, by simply hauling at the trigger, got 'her' off within five minutes of the rabbit's disappearance into shelter. Then I realized what a feat it must have been to kill seven 'set-up' rabbits in succession! But there is no telling what application will not accomplish. Thus it came to pass that I actually succeeded in killing a flying wood-pigeon with the old fellow's gun. It is only fair to myself to say that the calculations involved were elaborate and big, the chief of which was to begin hauling at the trigger with as many fingers as the guard would admit so soon as the pigeon came in sight, in this case on the far side of a big field.

There were a good many rats about, chiefly in some barley-ricks dotted about the farm. Ferreting rats in corn-ricks is always likely to prove unsatisfactory, because of the difficulty of killing a decent proportion of the rats and of securing the ferrets. Here again I was lucky. I had two polecat dog ferrets—brothers. One of them was a capital line ferret, and would hang on to rat or rabbit for hours. His brother, quite useless for line work, was an ideal ferret for loose work, and, curiously enough, he never would stay with a rat or a rabbit, nor would he often bite it. The rats I mentioned just now lived for the most part in the roofs of the ricks, which I would visit about twice a week with the loose-working ferret and my gun. And fine sport we had. He was a knowing ferret. I had only to toss the old chap on to the roof of a rick, and be ready for rats. He would range over the thatch till he winded a rat, when he would point for a moment before diving in and evicting Mr. Decumanus. By trapping at every likely spot round the ricks, and in tunnels and so forth in the hedges, I managed to overcome the rats.

There were, too, many magpies, and at one of them I made the flukiest shot of my life. Though I did not measure it, honestly I should think it was very little short of a hundred yards. I never could get near this particular magpie, and this made me feel sure his sins were even greater than I knew them to be. One day, in the middle of the afternoon, I saw him flying leisurely, as is the way of magpies, towards my little wood, where he alighted on the top of a tree, of course—no doubt where he, and certainly I, thought he was safe. So far off was he that he showed no objection to my walking in full view to the edge of the wood. I felt I was being jeered at, so I let drive at a venture in the direction of the top of the tree. And down came that magpie as if electrocuted.

Of stoats and weasels there was a fair stock; but by careful trapping in the hedges and around hay and corn ricks I cleared off the local supply for the time being; that is, till after the hatching season. The desolation which a litter of stoats can effect in a hedge well packed with partridge nests is enough to change a keeper's hair from black to white; and since as a rule on partridge ground rabbits are available only here and there, stoats do infinitely more harm to winged game than in a wood. Whatever the 'brother-in-law's' inclinations to lapse from the unexciting pursuit of agriculture, he was one of Nature's sportsmen, and he was ever on the look-out for 'varmints' of any sort. I came to him one day when he was spreading manure, and he told me he had bagged a crane in the course of his work. Never having heard of more than two sorts of cranes—the implement for lifting and the bird—I concluded that he meant by a crane a heron. He went on to describe how his crane ran out of a manure-heap. I became very much interested. After a deal of cross-examining, during which the old chap showed some irritation at my pardonable scepticism, I got out of him that his crane was a weasel, or 'wizzel,' as Hampshire folks say. (I did not then know that weasels and stoats in some localities are called cranes.)

Here is an account of how old B., the 'brother-in-law,' relieved me of responsibility in the matter of a poaching cat. Poaching cats were included, with gipsies, among the things he 'couldn't a-bear nohow.' The excursions of a large black cat belonging to a cluster of cottages (precisely to which one I preferred not to find out) had attracted my attention; so I decided to set a trap in a likely hedge, which, in fact, proved to be more than likely, for while I was struggling to get a peg into the stony bank, I saw black Thomas a quarter of a mile away, apparently prowling up the hedge. To shorten this cat's history, I was making my way along the hedge betimes next morning when I saw someone coming from the opposite direction. A few more yards, and he would reach my trap. I took cover, knowing that if the cat was caught, and the man did not let it out of the trap, he was certain to let it out of the bag, which was worse. Here was a pretty business. Another second, and a great rolling cloud of smoke enveloped the figure of the man. Then came a bang. Two poachers, perhaps, with one trap, I thought. Whoever the man was, he had now got clear of the smoke-fog, and was coming towards me. Nothing could be better, I thought, and kept my cover. The mysterious man turned out to be none other than old B. Waiting till he was within a yard of me, I asked without any warning, and in the gruffest of official tones, what he was up to. 'I b'lieve I've killed the old gentleman,' said old B. in an unusually guttural voice, so soon as he recovered from the surprise of seeing me. He explained his cryptic reply, and went on his way, while I went and put things straight. Old B. had spotted the black cat in the hedge, and being 'set-up,' he let drive at it; then, his superstition (luckily for me) got the better of his curiosity, and he came on without inspecting the cat. It was not till years afterwards that he knew the cat was in my trap when he shot it.

It was a mercy that foxes did not worry me in this first season of working up a run-down shoot. I had to preserve foxes as well as game. Their absence probably was due to the same cause as that of game—the preceding period of comparative anarchy. To dig out a litter of cubs and sell them for ten shillings each is a far more profitable and less risky venture than to poach for a few rabbits.

Anyway, the next season brought unmistakable improvement in the matter of foxes, to which it will be my painful duty to allude elsewhere. My first season was the only one during which I never lost a nest by foxes.

Human egg-stealers are very difficult to catch in such a way that their guilt may be proved. Consequently, I was very keen on making a capture. One Sunday morning, by sheer luck, I saw two suspicious-looking men enter my little covert. Now, I thought, was my chance; what would hide their movements would hide mine. I gained the edge of the covert and listened. Didn't my heart thump when I heard a stealthy movement through the stuff! It thumped still more when I heard a voice say, ''Ere's one, Bill.' 'How many?' asked Bill. 'Only four,' his companion answered. Timing my interruption to coincide with the lifting of the four eggs, I introduced myself to Bill and his mate with the suggestion that they had better leave them alone. Picture my disappointment when those four eggs turned out to be blue, with black spots at the thick end!

Here I must refer to a regrettable practice of the farmer, who, as I have said before, with slight alterations, might have been an ideal farmer from the gamekeeper's point of view. He never was without a fair stock of gipsies on the farm: not that he had any special personal regard for them, but more, I think, because they acted as a lever in dealing with the regular farm-hands. He would allow about two men, three women, and the usual cluster of children to camp on the farm, and gave them work or not, as he chose. Other things, I knew only too well, they took. He gave out that no unauthorized gipsy was to set foot on his land, by which he meant well; but I never could convince him that if the old proverb about birds of a feather applied to anything that could not fly, it applied to gipsies. So I was continually harassed by an assortment of gipsies, and, though the farmer talked a good deal, the brunt of dealing with them fell to my lot, much to my disgust. I would rather paunch a hundred mangled rabbits than touch a gipsy with the tip of a finger. The distant whiff of a gipsy is enough, and lodges in one's gullet with more persistency than fresh paint.

Gipsies, however, are not so renowned for their pluck, though, judging by the produce of their mouths, one might imagine that they possessed the blood of lions. Had I received half the good things promised me by gipsies, I should have died a thousand terrible deaths. I remember a burly-looking gipsy who was so impudent as to come into a harvest-field just before the finish of cutting, and with him he actually had the cheek to bring a lurcher. I went up to him, and, in the polite but firm manner which I have ever made it a rule to assume, requested him to leave the field and take his dog with him. He refused with offensive arrogance. With the same politeness, but with increased firmness, I explained that, if he felt unable to take himself off, I should feel bound to assist him. Whereupon he informed me that, sooner than go for me, he would see his liver torn out and flung on the ground. (He might have known that I should not hang on to any part of him a moment longer than necessary.) But go he did—liver, dog, and all—leaving only his scent to be carried away by the evening breeze.

The only occasion that I discovered when gipsies are a help to the keeper is when he has a difficulty in tainting out a colony of rabbits. Rabbits may refuse to be evicted by tar and so forth, but simply cannot abide the attar of gipsies. To evict the most obstinate bunnies, all that is necessary is to encamp a gang of gipsies on their burrow. I have in mind a burrow where the ground was undiggable. It was thoroughly 'gipped,' and after five years, though a rabbit may pay a call occasionally, none has taken up its abode there to this day of writing. The aversion of rabbits to gipsies, the latter often tried to persuade me, is reciprocated; I have yet to meet the gipsy who will not swear that he or she prefers a hedgehog to a rabbit any day.

People tried all sorts of tricks on me, one of which was for men who were mowing grass to bring me, presumably, two lots of about eight partridge eggs. Of course, they would swear each lot of eggs came from a separate nest. It was impossible to prove otherwise, and it would have been bad policy to have hinted too broadly at trickery, however strongly one might suspect it. All partridge eggs are very much the same to the ordinary eye, but one generally can detect a similarity of shape among the eggs laid by individual birds. If the number of small clutches brought in seemed to me to be unreasonable, and especially if the eggs in alleged separate nests bore a family resemblance, I would say that funds would not run to the customary shilling reward, except for respectable clutches. I had to listen to a good deal of gratuitous advice—more from a sense of politeness and diplomacy than because of its usefulness. One special hint, given just as the partridges were beginning to lay, was to the effect that all the keepers with whom my informant had had any 'concerns' lost no time in pressing at least a shilling into the hand of the finder so soon as a nest was found. My rule continued to be to pay a shilling for each nest of eggs, when safely hatched, if found in a reasonably legitimate way. It was only in very exceptional cases that I departed from this rule.

Another plan to encourage the care of game was to give threepence for the right ear-tip of leverets. One man produced four ear-tips, and I gave him sixpence. He stared, and I asked him what was the matter. He said he wanted another sixpence, on the ground that four threes are twelve. I reminded him of the rule to pay for right ear-tips only. He saw that I knew more than he bargained for about the ears of hares of all ages, and suggested that he 'must have forgot what he was got at.' I gave him another sixpence, and told him never again to forget 'what he was got at.'

CHAPTER III

MY FIRST SHOOT

Sweet September—Estimating birds—A night out—False alarms—Hungry, wet, and weary—The First—Bubble bags—A lurcher—My friend the shepherd—Ten-thirty—Who knows best?—My first tip—Forty and a half brace!

THIS important event took place on a fine September day in the year 1897 (memorable also for the Diamond Jubilee). It was the event of my first season as a full-blown keeper, with responsibilities and all the rest of it of my very own. Great was the pleasure of anticipation; greater still the relief when it was over. First of all I must give some description of the context of that day of fadeless memory. It is never the easiest thing in the world to form a correct estimate of the number of partridges on a given acreage of ground, especially before the shooting season, and when corn is still standing in big open fields. Certainly, I knew that I had some birds—more than enough, I hoped, to make a bag of six and a half brace; in fact, that there were several fine coveys. That in all there were so many birds to so many acres was what I could not feel sure of.

Already I had had plenty of experience of labourers and others who, after seeing two or three decent coveys (possibly the same covey over again), not only think, but make publicly known, that a place is swarming with birds, or, as one old fellow put it, 'there's 'osales o' birds.' I swallowed it all with a good deal of salt, knowing that the test of the partridge pudding comes in September. I never knew a good keeper who was given to exaggerating his partridge prospects; in other words, a man given to that form of exaggeration is seldom a good keeper.

Twenty brace of partridges to a party of four or five guns was quite a bumper bag in the days and locality of which I am writing. However, when the prospects for my first day came to be discussed at headquarters, I felt confident enough to suggest a possibility of twenty brace, if the day were fine and the guns passable. Often I have thought since how fortunate it is that few are the days of September with fine weather, plenty of good cover, lazy partridges, and skilled, active guns, armed, as is now the fashion, with a pair of ejectors. Partridges could not stand much of that. It readily will be imagined into what a state of suppressed excitement I got as the First drew near, with its prospect of active service and of the harvest of those long

THERE'S MANY A SLIP BETWEEN A GOOD HATCH AND SEPTEMBER.

WHAT A FOX LEFT OF A PHEASANT SITTING ON FOURTEEN EGGS.

months of hard labour. I had worked, as it were, day and night in the cause of partridges. With infinite care I had bushed and watched the favourite roosting parts, although there was no great likelihood of netting. Still, I grew more determined than ever as the days of reckoning drew near not to let slip what reward might be mine. The first day's shooting was fixed for the second of September, so I decided to put in the whole of the last night of August in the field with my partridges. I even made a vow to forgo the consolation of my pipe, for fear of giving away my presence. My object was not to scare poachers, but to catch them, so that I might appear early in the morning of the First with a heavy and perfectly legitimate bag.

I set out about half-past seven, after a mixture of tea and supper, taking further supplies of food in my pocket. I took with me also an old-fashioned cloth-faced mackintosh of the Inverness pattern (which, on acquiring a 'Burberry,' I sold for half a crown). The earlier part of that night was not so bad, though there was no suggestion of balminess in the air. Things grew worse. It began to rain and blow. For hours and hours I walked about in the darkness—in the cold, the wet, and the wind. It was not possible to see much, while as for hearing—well, I could hear enough to make me think anything was happening. A mouse rustling in a hedge; a straw swaying and grating on a thistle-stem; the passage of a rat from one rick to another; the call of peewits; the rush of a hurrying hare—there were dozens of sounds which by day would have passed unheeded, but then were absurdly magnified and garbled by my straining ears.

Once, while I was sheltering by a heap of straw on the edge of an old cartway, I felt certain that I could hear the crunching sound of men's feet coming toward me. By Jove! didn't my heart thump. But no partridge-netters came to break the dreariness of that dark, cheerless night. I never discovered the cause of my disappointment, though to this day I am sure I heard the stealthy tramp of human feet, possibly the ghostly feet of dead poachers. And so for that night passed the sole prospect of covering myself with glory and bespattered brains, and, incidentally, of getting warm. Morning seemed as if it never were coming. Long ago I had eaten the last crumb of food, and felt I would have paid a premium price for the top of a loaf. At least two solid supplementary meals are required to carry one through a night. As there was now no likelihood of netters—for whom to tell the honest truth, I had become quite sick of waiting—I sought shelter and less cold by crouching against the lee-side of a corn-rick. But everything was dripping wet, and the wind seemed to be playing a game of blind-man's buff round that rick;

so that, no matter how I shifted my position, the crisis came just where I was. I tried to kill time by sleep, but it was a wretched business. There was no forgetting that I was hungry, damp (to say the least of it), and cold—stiff and sleepless with cold. I would have gone home had I not suspected that shots might be fired at drowsy coveys making their way to breakfast in the grey light of dawn. Once dawn had come, it would not be long before farm-hands would be stirring about the fields, and poaching would be unnecessarily risky.

At last, hungry, cold, and weary of watching, but with a sense of moral triumph and self-conquest, I started for home. I must confess that during that weary trudge I felt that nothing but a guarantee of an exceptional First, glorious both in birds and weather, would have induced me to relish a prospect of spending the rest of the day shooting. However, a wash, dry clothes, and breakfast worked wonders. And long before the modern hour for starting shooting my keenness was normal, and I was off again to my partridge fields. The night that was past I thought of merely as a dream.

The shooting on all sides beyond the boundary was let, and it was not long before I heard pop, pop-pop, pop—pop—pop, each shot a note of music, each volley a delicious chord. In all directions beyond my marches I heard parties saluting sweet September. I thought they must be getting all sorts of fine bags; for, not unnaturally, I judged the result of their blazing by a flattering standard. It never dawned on me but that each supposed covey rose at the toes of the shooters, that each of them scored a double, and that each volley meant several brace in the bag. My curiosity grew apace, and it was not long before I found myself in a gap in a boundary fence, from which I was able, much to my relief, to burst my bubble notions of the next-door bag. Each bird that rose was saluted by a double shot, apparently from any of the party who saw it, and quite irrespective of range; and I doubt not that it would have met with the same indignity if seen on the ground. Fortunately, these people were not only bad sportsmen, but bad shots—a detestable combination. There was another feature in their plan of campaign which quickly attracted my attention—their dogs, one of which struck me as—well, unusual, to say the least of it. But I was unable to solve the mystery of this dog till the party worked round the outside turn nearest the boundary. A hare got up as the line was wheeling in a very go-as-you-please formation, but, as the gunners were caught napping, did not receive their united attention till it was a good seventy or eighty yards distant, end on. The hare went on. Whereupon, to my intense surprise, the unusual-looking dog was loosed—a pot-house lurcher. How my blood boiled! how

I ground impotent teeth at that ghastly sight! They did not send the dog for a badly-wounded hare from motive of mercy, but simply in the hope that they might yet secure it for their pot, after failing at an easy chance to bag it themselves. How I should have revelled in sending a charge of shot at the middle of each of those retreating apologies for sportsmen! Consoling myself with the old adage that what the eye does not see the heart does not grieve for, I walked away from sight of this blood-curdling business.

The rest of the day I spent in perfecting my plans for the morrow, and while I was so doing met my friend the shepherd, a burly middle-aged man who loved a pint of beer and a fight about equally well, and next to these a rabbit 'pudd'n.' He had great news for me. Here it is in his own words:

"Me an' t' ould dawg was a-blunderin' along, as t' sayin' is, acrorst they barley stubbs yarnder, and thinkin' about noth'n' pertickler-like, when up gits the doocedest girt mess o' birds as ever I set eyes on in all my barn days. I thought they was starluns when they riz up. Howsomedever, summat made me screw m' eyes on 'em a liddle tighter, an' I sez to meself an' ter t' ould dog, "Why, I'll be jiggered if they ain't pairtridges."' I had been lucky with some 'setty' eggs cut out in the mowing of grass for hay, and had turned down the proceeds along the edge of a big piece of barley. I handed a rabbit which I happened to have in my pocket to the shepherd, and each of us went his way rejoicing.

Probably my experience of the previous night accounted for my getting some sleep during the night immediately preceding the second day of September. The hour for meeting the guns was 10.30, but long before then I was ready and waiting, my boots brushed till their polish began to depreciate, and my box-cloth gaiters spotless. I had with me, to help, a sport-loving farm-hand, who had been my colleague through the winter while ferreting rabbits. He was as good a hand at marking the fall of a bird as it has been my lot to meet. Each of us had a partridge-carrier, which we hoped to fill, and I had the only dog I possessed, a young rough-curly retriever, trained to the stage when, though useful, she was still much too inclined to amuse herself with hares and rabbits, and in other uncertain ways. I kept her in tow by a rope round my waist, so that if she 'went' she had to take me with her. Well, to cut a long story short, the guns arrived on the late side of 10.30, as is often the way of guns who drive while the keeper walks. Not having been accustomed to the regulation method of salute, I lifted my cap nearly off my head, which, since there was no intimation to the contrary, I suppose was appreciated. And there was an ominous pause preceding the 'sir' when I returned the individual 'Good-mornings.' However, it was a glorious morning, and everyone seemed in good humour. I quickly put the guns together, shouldered a burden of cartridge-bags, and off we went.

For the first beat we spread out over a big field consisting mostly of stubble, the right-hand gun forward under a long belt of beeches, which was the boundary. The object was to push the birds —if there were any—into a very long narrow strip of ripening rye-grass, on the far side of a high hedge. This grass was the only piece of holding cover; still, it provided not only cover, but food for the birds, which therefore took to it the more readily. I cannot explain how great was my relief when the first covey was flushed, almost at the feet of the right-hand outside gun. The birds probably were dusting on the margin of the belt. Only one bird was bagged. We saw one good covey and two small lots on all that wide field, probably over sixty acres. If I did not feel disappointed, I very nearly did. Had we seen another covey or two, it would not have been so bad, even if they had risen miles out of shot. All I knew for certain was that my fate hung on that strip of rye-grass.

But, as it turned out, hundreds of birds must have run on through the hedge into the grass, or have been there before we began shooting. The strip was only wide enough for one beat, but it must have been a third of a mile long, so that many of the birds that did not break sideways pitched in it again. If all my five guns had been useful, our two double-rowed partridge-carriers would have been full before we reached the end of that strip of grass. The most exciting episode was when there were seven birds down, five of which proved to be runners—and we got them all. Another incident of note was the 'browning' of a big covey which rose out of fair range. Three birds more or less 'towered' after flying some distance apparently untouched. We had finished the rye-grass for the time being, and lunch would be in ten minutes. I advised a détour of a couple of hundred yards, which would sweep the scattered birds into the grass, while I searched for the three 'browned' birds. But no: it was preferred to walk straight ahead, and, as I said, drive most of the birds over the boundary, for the sake of walking an extra two hundred yards. I was almost sorry that I had found the three birds by the time the firing-line returned to tell me—quite unnecessarily—that they had had only a few shots, but had put a good two hundred partridges over the boundary.

There was some excitement after lunch, when one of the guns 'cracked his duck,' so to speak, on a cheeper. I believe it was subsequent to the suppression of that cheeper that he got into Parliament and bagged a title. I remember much more distinctly that he left before we had finished shooting; that I offered to fetch his coat from a cottage; and, most important of all, that he thrust a five-shilling piece into my hand. Whereat I felt so opulent that, in spite of so great an increase to an already heavy load, my boots felt like pumps for the rest of the day.

Apart from my soreness at the loss of a good two hundred partridges driven over the boundary, which was very far from being my fault, everything went well with me that day—even to a total absence of regrettable incidents on the part of my dog. And when we counted the bag, there were forty and a half brace of birds and a score of hares. I reached home to find that the fame of the day had gone before. Till I went to sleep that night I talked of nothing but partridges, tips, and 'ifs.' It was a great stroke of luck that my first season turned out meet to be recorded in red ink. From that first shoot I never looked back on my determination to make game-keeping a success.

CHAPTER IV

PARTRIDGES

Their popularity and thrift—Their comparative scarcity—How they are persecuted—Thoughtless shooters—Partridges pay for attention—Birds in bad weather—Poverty of their food compared to that of pheasants—Value of artificial feeding—Destruction of nests—Cheap nesting cover—Coverts—Why always pheasants?—Dogs and nests—Faults of partridges—Farmers and compensation—A health to the bonny brown birds!

THERE is scarcely an acre in the whole country—with the exception, of course, of the brick-and-mortar department—on which plenty of partridges could not make a living if they were allowed to try; there is scarcely a shoot on which there are absolutely no partridges, and there are very few shoots on which partridges receive a tithe of the encouragement they deserve. And partridges surely deserve every encouragement, in view of their thrifty habits, their industry, their heroic efforts to greet September with a smile, no matter how bad a breeding season they have had to put up with; and, above all, in view of their superb abilities for providing real sport in so many ways, both for rich and poor. Because of their many points of all-round merit, I proclaim partridges the most attractive game-birds we possess. And I have no hesitation in saying that they are likely to remain so, and that they will grow in favour every year, unless, indeed, English sportsmanship deteriorates, and English gunners descend toshooting the sitting blackbird, after the manner of Frenchmen.

Some may urge that the snipe is a more fascinating bird than the partridge; others may extol the capricious favours of woodcock. Both these birds are, I am afraid, far too local and fickle ever to oust the partridge from its solid position. It must be admitted, of course, that the shortcomings of the long-bills—snipe particularly—are due largely to the invasion of their haunts by men with drain-pipes and bricks and mortar. One still comes across men who say, in effect: 'Give me an old cock pheasant rising from the shelter of a leafy turnip or patch of brambles.' But they do not add the reason—that they may shoot him by placing their gun-barrels almost in actual contact with his plumage. Such shooters may appreciate the vociferous and sustained applause of the whole party, and the intolerable incense of powder and fused feathers. I abominate both.

Give me partridges, and plenty of them.

In judging numbers of partridges most people overestimate to a ridiculous extent. They see two or three passable coveys on a large farm, and call them 'clouds of birds.' What, perhaps, has impressed me most in the delightful years spent among game-birds is the general scarcity of partridges on the majority of shoots compared to the supply there might be. Only here and there is there partridge ground, reasonably suited to their needs, which carries a tenth—even a hundredth—of the birds there might be, and ought to be quite easily. Simply because partridges try to help themselves they are generally denied the assistance which is lavished on less deserving birds. Altogether, the usual treatment which partridges meet with is totally unwarranted and grossly unjust. It is crying aloud for speedy improvement. Even I, in the wilds of my beloved Hampshire, have heard of recent years enough about 'social reform and betterment' to keep me going for the rest of my life. But I have heard little of partridge reform. On the majority of so-called partridge shoots what birds do manage to exist are subjected, from one year's end to another, to what amounts to nothing else than persecution by day and night. Moreover, the persecution during the legal shooting season is the worst part of the whole thing. This is much more directly under the control of the holders of sporting rights than the more or less inevitable persecution by vermin during the productive season.

Take the period of the year between February 2 and August 31—what about the partridges then?

SECTION OF WOODCOCK'S WING SHOWING POSITION

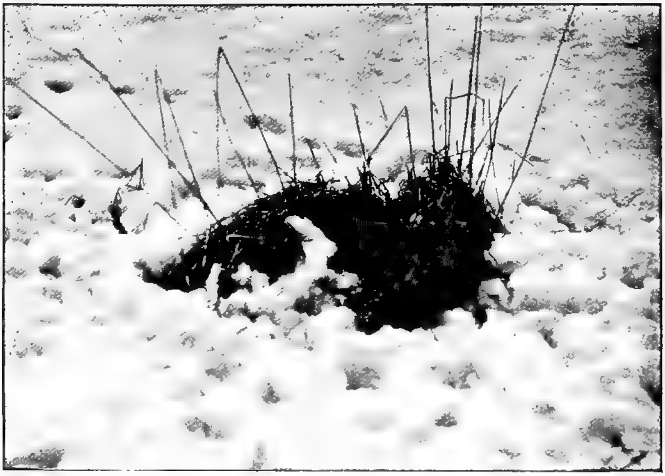
SED).

UPPER MANDIBLE.

Who knows? Who cares? Certainly not the men who spend every day that the law allows them during the remainder of the year pursuing any birds which happen to be on their shoot. I really believe that there must be men in existence who are under the impression that partridges spring up, as it were, spontaneously, after the manner of charlock plants; that is, sometimes there arise many and sometimes few. On the general run of partridge ground there is never anything like a stock of birds at the end of the season. It is a melancholy fact that the same remark applies in countless instances to capital natural partridge ground, even on the First. Yet the few people who realize how partridges respond to careful protection and encouragement have been reaping rich harvests. For instance, you hear, as in a delicious dream of a fairyland of partridges, of a week at Holkham, at The Grange, at Stratton, and a few other places where partridges are estimated at their proper value and treated accordingly.

But to return to the lucky survivors (many of them cripples) of the preceding season on ordinary partridge ground on February 2. How are they faring in the bleak, wind-swept fields, covered often for days together with snow, or adamant with frost? And who cares? Perhaps the keeper—probably he does not; for, obviously, so far as practical care is shown, the master makes the man. At any rate, I feel pretty sure that the men who have been blazing away at the birds to the bitter end are the last to give the matter a thought. They are content to leave what they are pleased to call a *stock* to the mercy of the weather, generally the most trying of the whole year; to the pangs of hunger, without a yard of stubble accessible; and to the unchecked ravages of vermin everlastingly on the prowl. It is all very well to urge, in extenuation of total neglect, that severe weather, short commons, and the attentions of vermin purge the stock birds of weaklings. That is no excuse for forgetting that what kills undesirables must weaken the rest, and must tend to weak-germed eggs and delicate chicks, ready to perish in the first spell of bad weather. But please don't run away with the idea that I advocate coddling partridges after the manner of the unfortunate pheasant that spends most of its life in coop and pen.

A partridge under average conditions can hold its own with most birds in point of plumpness. Is not 'as plump as a partridge' a common simile? But kill a partridge after a week's or a fortnight's frost, and its emaciated breast will provide about as much meat as a thrush's. Surely this is just the time when the birds which are to continue their race require, if only in the interest of the superb sport they provide, food, decent both in quantity and quality. What is there for them? Some of the lucky ones may be able to snatch a few grains



April 26, 1908. Tracks of French partridge to her nest in tuft of dead grass. A pheasant that was sharing the nest never came near it.

April 26, 1908.

of corn round unthrashed stacks, the crumbs merely of the rooks' stolen feasts. Would you not be horrified to think that your pheasants fared on the leavings of rooks?

In winter weather the principal foods of partridges are young clover and the leaves of root crops, with odds and ends of various green-stuffs and weeds. These they must eat or starve. I have seen partridges actually perched on a hedge devouring hips. On the other hand, pheasants, besides enjoying the shelter and warmth of the woods, are seldom without some arrangement for supplementing such wild provender as they may find, chiefly in a varying crop of acorns and beech-mast, not to mention the many delicacies easily discovered lurking among the thick carpet of fallen leaves. To crown their comparatively riotous natural living, a keeper will come round once or twice a day with gallons of maize and choice seed mixtures, the latter often made appetizing, or the reverse, with chemical condiments. To amuse themselves with between meals, there are always available barley, wheat, and oat rakings—sideboard dishes—piled in convenient stacks in the cosy corners of the coverts. The pheasants even enjoy the services of a man to pull out the rakings, so that they may the more easily wallow in ceaseless feastings. Give half, a quarter, or even a tenth, of this corn to the partridges, and when the days of reckoning come they will not show themselves in ungrateful numbers.

In localities where there are numerous woods this luxurious feeding of the pheasants, while the partridges are given full option to starve in the fields, has a very annoying result, especially when a covert belongs to one shoot and the fields adjoining it to another. The partridges—and I don't blame them—find out the artificial banqueting-halls in the pheasant covert, and regularly visit them each morning; and, finding things generally more pleasant and comfortable than in the open fields, stay in the covert all day till it is time to betake themselves to the fields to roost. Now, there is nothing much more satisfactory, sandwiched between pheasants of satiating sameness, than a right and left from a covey of partridges among the trees of a wood. But, after all, the fields are where you want to find your partridges. To have two or three blank drives off fields near woods when plenty of birds are known to be about is very annoying.

Depend upon it, there is no better way to insure finding your partridges where and when you wish than by feeding them very slightly, but regularly. A handful of 'tailing' grain, preferably wheat, with a few seeds, such as dari, trickled along a furrow up the middle of each principal drive, will insure freedom from the disappointment of not being able to find your birds on driving days. Often have I heard sportsmen and keepers discussing how curious is the phenomenon that, whereas on a certain part of a shoot there were 'any amount' of birds up to the beginning of October, after that there were scarcely any, and *vice versa.* The very simple explanation is a question of food. And since it may so happen that fields to which your September supplies of birds may adjourn in October (when wheat is mostly sown) are beyond your boundary, the fact may prove not only curious, but annoying.

Then partridge coverts are, if not unheard of, unthought of, on ninety-nine shoots out of a hundred. By partridge coverts I do not necessarily mean a collection of holding stuff, from which the birds may be shot with greater ease. Why should partridges be compelled to take pot-luck, and yet be growled at without stint when they do not figure in bags reckoned by hundreds of brace? On grouse moors we all know how carefully the heather is burnt, so that there shall be young shoots for food and old heather for nesting and cover. Thus are grouse catered for as far as the ingenuity, money, and sweat of man can assist them. If they were just left to make the most they could of their natural surroundings, even then they possess an immense advantage over partridges. With partridges, numberless nests must be destroyed accidentally by farming operations, of which grouse are in no danger. Curiously enough, it is the very men who take the keenest delight in the safe hatching off of any sitting partridges they 'knows on' who are responsible for the destruction of scores of nests. Tenant farmers who take the greatest possible interest in the winged game on their farms; shepherds who would consider the advisability of pole-axing their dog if they knew it to interfere with a sitting bird; carters and waggoners whose rhetorical powers are in evidence mainly during their descriptions of the gigantic coveys they have flushed, who will take almost as much trouble in rescuing little birds from the danger of the whirring knives of grass-mowers and self-binders as they would their own children; and general farm-labourers, the hobby of whose lives is sport, who are almost to a man honorary keepers on the farms whereon they work—none of these can avoid the innocent destruction of many nests. Nine partridge nests out of ten found when grass is being cut for hay are churned into a pitiful mass of feathers and broken eggs, the close-sitting hen often being gashed to pieces. The thousands of eggs thus wasted each year constitute a heavy tax on the reproductive efforts of partridges.

For nesting sites there may be generous hedgerows, marking the boundaries of the fields. In them it may be difficult for men to see the nests, but it is the easiest thing in the world for ground vermin to find them. In the absence of other attractive, but diffused, nesting cover, the worst of a few fine hedgerows is that they are also fine highways for vermin. When, as is often the case, scores of nests are packed in a few hedgerows, wholesale losses are only too possible, no matter how keenly vermin is kept down. A fox, by way of a single night's devilish dissipation, may clear off sitting birds wholesale. A family of travelling stoats may take an undesirable route, with the inevitable consequence that untold nests are spoilt before there is any possibility of the invasion being discovered by the most alert keeper.

Harking back to the question of partridge coverts, I should be the last to look upon the good sportsman of shallow pocket as a fool because he failed, on a small rented shoot, to lay out elaborate coverts especially for partridges; but I should like to see him help our bonny British partridges to increase—cheaply—by helping them to help themselves. As one cheap but effective means to that end, I recommend more satisfactory nesting accommodation than the birds at present usually have. This can be attained quickly—and profitably, too—even on a shoot rented for a short term. On ordinary partridge ground there is no spot in which a nest stands a better chance of hatching than somewhere in an open field. It is practically safe from the human nest-spoiler, and to a maximum extent from foxes and vermin. So far, so good. But early in May, when partridges begin to lay in earnest, there are few fields possessing the amount of cover which the birds consider decent for nesting purposes, except grass fields. Unfortunately, the majority of these are mown for hay about ten days before the majority of the eggs are ready to hatch. Hence the disastrous results practically unavoidable now that the whirring horse-drawn 'cutters' do all the mowing.

I have known a partridge to lay on a bare fallow. Special precautions were taken to see whether she would succeed in hatching her eggs, and she did so. True, there were not any foxes dangerously near, and since the rooks did not demolish the eggs, I imagine they must have looked upon the nest as a hoax.

Here are my ideas on partridge coverts where money is an object. The crops which I rejoice to see here and there are rye (for seed) and forward-sown vetches; if the latter also are left for seed, so much the better. When foxes have been specially attentive to nests in hedges, I have often found consolation in such crops. A nest in a field growing the crops I have named is little more liable to suffer from weather than one in a hedge-side. Hence, by way of cheap, quick-growing, and effective partridge coverts, I do not see that anything can surpass the sowing of strips or patches of rye and autumn vetches at suitable intervals, and preferably on the higher parts of the fields. Certainly, elaborately planted and fenced partridge coverts or sanctuaries are all very well for those who can afford them—and, of course, for the partridges. And if these luxuries are systematically installed over an estate, the process of driving the birds is considerably simplified. However, the chief use of such permanent coverts is for the betterment of the birds' nesting; but if you want the partridges to take full advantage of them, the stuff of which they are composed *must* be kept thin and short.

So far as its practical form goes, the interest taken by the average man who owns or rents partridge ground is none the better for its sudden blossoming forth when September is getting near. It is really of little more use to the birds' welfare than the compassion of the ordinary non-shooting man in the country, who corresponds to the so-called 'man in the street' in town. The former does not think about partridges at all till the latter end of August; then he may remark casually—probably at dinner—that he supposes the first of September will soon be here, and metaphorically will smack his lips in view of the annual prospect of a brace of birds from someone. It never enters this individual's head that partridges do not come with the month more or less as mushrooms, or spring flowers, or June roses. I do not expect him to believe that partridges would show an appreciable return were they to receive a tithe of the attention which is lavished so ungrudgingly, but unnecessarily, on pheasants. By way of publishing how much he observes, he actually will go so far as to make some pretence at restraining the trespassing proclivities of his dog when he passes through a wood, lest the fiend disturb the pheasants—just as if they were neurotic individuals ordered the rest-cure. Two minutes later he fails to take the slightest notice when partridge after partridge flies up from under his brute's nose—from nests, of course. I never can make out why this man—call him what you will; I've called him several things!—so dearly loves to be considered superior to the townsmen in sporting science, or why he will persist in considering that pheasants alone constitute 'disturbable' game. I wonder on how many occasions, when I have been asked whether people might take strolls in certain parts of a shoot, and I have answered that I had no objection provided that they did not tread in the hedge-sides, or hold rollicking picnics in certain dells, or take with them a dog guaranteed innocent of malice aforethought and everything else, have I heard the remark: 'Why? *Will* it disturb the pheasants?'

Slowly, but none the less surely, partridges will forge their way to the top of the pole—not only as the most popular game-birds in the country, but as the cheapest to produce, and in many other ways the most desirable. There is only one fault that the

Partridge on her nest.
(An exposure of 6 seconds.)

Off to feed.

gourmand can urge against the partridge—that on the table it is too small. Even this deficiency it makes ample atonement for in flavour; while there is no law to prevent anyone eating five brace or more birds at a meal. The only fault which the sportsman finds with the partridge is that it sometimes flies too fast. Here the remedy clearly lies with the sportsman.

Another reason for emphasizing the ever-increasing boom in partridges is the recent Land Tenure Act. Although, in common fairness, I have nothing to say against the Act, so long as it is administered by men who understand their business, I am inclined to think there will be bother connected with imaginary damage. This must tend to a preference for cheap game of non-destructive habits. I freely admit that it is possible for rabbits, hares, and even pheasants, to commit acts of damage; but I could put my finger on farmers who, when they claim their damages under the new Act, will find that their banking account is not thereby so much swollen as when they merely 'mentioned the matter' to those holding the shooting rights over their farms, and left the assessment to them. For instance, a farmer of my acquaintance was till recently practically in receipt of a useful annuity from the shooting tenant of his farm. This was paid as a little help towards his rent. I am certain, however, that in no single year did the real value of the crops damaged by game, including rabbits and hares, exceed a sovereign. No doubt and no wonder, in consideration of existing circumstances, the farmer did not take full advantage of the Ground Game Act! Now all this is changed, and the crops themselves must be relied upon directly to provide the amount required against the day of audit.

Though I have heard enough complaints concerning rabbits to make me for ever sick of the very mention of their name, none of the petitioners has ever launched the most speculative accusation against partridges. In view of the evidence upon which many other complaints have been founded, I must confess that I am somewhat surprised. With some of the farmers with whom I have had to deal the excuse must be that damage by partridges never entered their heads. I have made it my business specially to inquire of good farmers, who were also good sportsmen, and shot as often as they got the chance, whether they thought that partridges were in any way capable of doing a farmer, or anyone else, damage; and if so, how, when, and where. The reply from one and all may best be given in its raw state: 'Well, I dunno as they do.' One whom I questioned told me, as, of course, I knew quite well already, that there was only one combination of circumstances in which partridges might justly be considered to do 'no good'—that is, when a really good stock of birds has been left, such as a 'Grange' stock, for instance, after a fairish year, and a farmer possesses a piece of forward vetches, and the weather is such that snow covers stubbles, clover, etc., but not the vetches. Then, unless a thaw quickly arrives, partridges are liable to peck off the tops of the vetches somewhat severely. But it was admitted, in mitigation of this one slight failing, that partridges at their worst inflict nothing approaching the damage done by the winter flocks of gluttonous pigeons.

Here's to your health, you bonny brown British partridges, with many happy returns of good seasons, in which I may drive you over other people, or shoot at your hurtling forms myself; I don't care which, for both these things are fine sport. And may you never, like those yellow-fatted pheasants, be brought under the sordid thumb of £ s. d.!

CHAPTER V

PARTRIDGE-SHOOTING

Anticipation—Modern methods—Weather and wildness—The more birds, the wilder they are—Towering birds—The legs-down fallacy—The cloud of feathers—Some stories—Driving—Skill and circumstances—Observations on driving.

THERE is in the anticipation of September partridge-shooting a pleasure almost equal to that of consummation. There is no perfume comparable to that enchanting blend of charlock flowers, turnips, clover-heads, and stubble. I wonder on how many evenings of late August I have paused by some gate on the fringe of my partridge-fields to enjoy a pipe of fragrant shag; to sniff the savour of dewy earth; to hear the lullabies of crouching coveys; and to listen to what sounds gave requiem to-day. What incense came from those beloved fields! What glorious nocturnes in the call of partridges and the wild wail of the curlew!

The keeper of to-day has good reason to rejoice that the high stubbles and tall turnips are no more. Just imagine how partridges would fare in front of modern ejectors, handled even with moderate skill. What awful carnage there would be! The task of finding the slain in vast seas of such high, dense cover would change the keeper into a sort of sporting scavenger. There would be, however, in these days, one redeeming feature about old-fashioned cover—there would not be so many birds wounded, to carry on and die, which is the curse of modern partridge-shooting, by the walking-up method. Probably there is no self-styled sportsman more despised by keepers than he who comes out to shoot for slaughter only. On he races all the time, dropping wild-rising birds in all directions. But in what direction he knows not, nor cares, when the keeper asks him where his birds are down. Likely enough he does not know even how many he has down. Days afterwards the keeper happens on many a maggoty mass, and breathes a sheaf of blessings on the murderer's head.

There is no doubt that partridges nowadays are much wilder than they were years ago. They seem to get wilder every year. With the coming of shaven stubbles, all sorts of rattling machines (even to motor-binders), and a general lack of holding cover, it was only natural that birds should be more difficult to approach. Yet, if one comes to think of it, machines and other things which doubtless tend to make birds wilder than otherwise they might be are not now materially different to what they were twenty years ago. Then, if one marked a covey down, and went straight for it, oftener than not the birds would lie within easy range, even when there was no cover. In the early days of September birds would lie well on stubble, while of late years it has been hopeless to expect any shooting to speak of by walking up birds on stubble. You may mark a dozen coveys, and are lucky if you get within shot of one of them. I remember one day, a few years ago, on which we expected to make a good bag, walking. It was the sixth of September; there were a good lot of birds, and not a shot had been fired at them; five guns and six men to walk between them. There was not much cover, it is true, but quite enough to bag a reasonable number of birds for one day. It had rained heavily during the earlier part of the morning, and though it stopped before we began shooting, the weather was sullen all day. Off the first large field, some thirty acres of stubble, we flushed quite a hundred birds—not one of them within a hundred yards. And so things went on; and, if I remember rightly, not a shot had been fired at a bird within forty yards when it was decided to do what we could by impromptu driving.

Of course, anyone who understands the habits of partridges knows that a combination of wet, cold, and wind makes them uncomfortable and extra wild, probably making the bag only half what it would have been in fine weather. But here is an instance to show how much wilder partridges have become when, so far as the weather is concerned, they ought to lie like the proverbial stones. During the wonderful weather in the autumn of 1908, I went out on four different farms on which not a shot had been fired, and had the greatest difficulty in getting the brace or two I required. And it is no exaggeration to say that on one of the farms, of six hundred acres, there were a thousand partridges. Of course, well walked by an active party of guns and beaters, the birds soon would have tired, owing to the exceptional sultriness. One great cause which, I consider, is equally as responsible as driving for the increasing wildness of partridges is their increasing numbers. Still, I do not mind how wild they become so long as they continue to increase.

Directly guns come within sight of a field whereon there are a lot of partridges—and often when yet a field or two away—the birds start running, each lot taking the tip from the other. On they race, possibly to rise and pour over the far hedge in a brown shoal. Perhaps they do not rise, but run through the hedge, so that their pursuers do not enjoy the satisfaction even of seeing them. This sort of thing is very liable to happen when only a small party is out, and the fields are big. The keeper gets the credit of having one bird where he has ten. Here is an illustration. I went one afternoon in early September with one gun to an outlying part of my beat. It was just after lunch; the sun shone warmly, and the air was still. We tried three big fields, in which were stubble, sainfoin, and turnips (of which there were quite thirty acres). I knew well enough there were plenty of partridges. And nine-tenths of them must have been in those turnips when we two began to walk them. We saw only one good covey and a few odd birds. My companion killed one bird. Certainly I might have killed another, but was attending to my dog when it rose, and did not try.

A fortnight or so afterwards we were to have a day's driving, and I was asked where I proposed to begin. I said I wanted to have three drives over those fields on which one bird had been bagged on an ideal September afternoon, and perhaps a score of others seen. 'But,' came the comment, 'there are no birds there.' 'I think there are,' I ventured to say; 'try, and see.' At the first drive—from those white turnips—an outside gun, who got appreciably less shooting than the rest, bagged five and a half brace.

If there is one thing all keepers hate, it is a boy being let loose with a gun and a dog on ground which at least has not been shot over once. This is how a boy enjoyed himself thoroughly at the expense of my partridges and—well, other things, We were having no shooting-parties just then, so he was allowed, much against my inclination, to fool about by himself when and where he liked. One morning, when I was with some hand-reared pheasants in a wood, beyond which was a large piece of roots, I heard an occasional bang-bang. This was enough to tell me that the boy was on the war-path. As I feared they would, the bang-bangs became much nearer and much more frequent, interspersed with tremendous yelling on the part of the boy, and yapping on the part of his wild spaniel. As the uproar continued for some time, and I knew that a couple of minutes of it must have caused most of the partridges to clear out, I began to have suspicions. To have gone to the edge of the wood and watched the performance would have been easy. But it was not necessary. There was a frequent swish of wings as my pheasants returned to covert. At the next feed there were to be seen some that crawled, some that hopped, and some that drooped a wing. Luckily that boy returned to school in the evening, but not before he came with great glee to tell me he had bagged so many partridges. I asked if they all were partridges, and he confessed there was some doubt about—one. That was all the satisfaction I got.

There is no doubt that the fewer the partridges, the better they lie. This bears out my surmise that the increasing wildness of partridges must be attributed largely to their increasing numbers. Even as it is easier to approach within range of a single wood-pigeon or a feeding rabbit than a crowd of either, so is it easier to come within shot of small lots of partridges, few and far between, with this difference: you are watching the pigeons or rabbits, which probably cannot see you, while in the pursuit of partridges matters are reversed. This comparative tameness of partridges that are few goes to show with what discretion shooting should be regulated in a bad year. For, by reason of their approachability, any birds that have managed to survive are certain to suffer out of all proportion to their numbers.

The 'towered' bird continues to give rise to interesting speculation among shooting-men. Some say it is hit in the lungs, and others in the head. But the bird struck in the head, although it may rise to a fair height, is not a genuine towerer, often glides down with outstretched wings, and is liable to get up again. It is pretty generally conceded that a towering bird goes up and up to get air, and dies in the air at the moment its descent begins. To get air means to breathe more easily, and probably the reason why the bird has difficulty in breathing, yet can fly, is that it is being drowned in an inverted fashion in its own blood; that is to say, it has received a wound which causes blood to escape into its breathing mechanism. When the inrush of blood is great, a bird is suffocated before it has got many feet up. The slighter the escape of blood into the breath-passages, the longer is it before a bird dies, and, consequently, the greater the height to which it rises. It may be asked, Why does the towering or perpendicular flight make it easier for a bird to breathe than the horizontal? Because, I think, it retards the escape of blood into the windpipe and throat—and, thus, the bird's suffocation.

The effect on any bird of a blow on the head which is not hard enough to kill it outright is to make the bird throw up its head, flap its wings, and depress its tail. Why this should be so I do not know, but I feel sure it explains why partridges imitate the towering performance when struck by a pellet in the head, though not in an immediately fatal part. It makes them depress their tails, so that, their wings still being in motion, they must go up. Those birds which occasionally fall like a stone, and remain for a time as dead, and then get up and fly off as if they never had been hit, probably have been struck in the beak, the effect being similar to that of a blow on the jaw of a man. Another deceptive bird is the one (so often seen when partridges are being walked up) that goes away with one or both legs hanging down, and often with rickety, zigzag flight. I wonder how often, when I have been setting off to search for such a bird, I have received the information that it cannot possibly run, since both its legs are broken. Fortunately, both for itself and the keeper who has to look for it, the bird, as a rule, falls dead—always, in my experience, when it gives a preliminary upward twist. But when it glides down, say, on the fringe of a hedge, there is nothing in the shape of broken legs to prevent it from running. The cause of the stilt-like hanging of leg or legs is a wound in the back which paralyzes, temporarily or otherwise, the nerves controlling the usual tucked-up position of the legs during flight.

We all know the disappointment of losing a partridge from which has come the proverbial cloud of feathers, though positive that it could not have got more than just over the hedge. In fact it may have gone over the horizon. The fewer the feathers that come from a bird at sporting range, the more likely is it to have been hit in a fatal spot. The cloud of feathers is likely enough to be produced by shot ploughing through the mass of feathers above the tail. That is to say, you sometimes and I (often) have shot a bit too far behind a bird which was rising imperceptibly. A few golden inches forwarder and the rising would not have mattered. When I have been out with good shots—which was a treat I did not get very often—I have found it profitable to watch birds going away, apparently after being missed at longish range. Oftentimes a bird will slacken speed a trifle, particularly when topping a hedge. It is well worth while to have a look the other side of the hedge for a few yards on both sides of the bird's line, even though you did not actually see it fall. Good shots shoot well forward, and are very likely to hit a bird in the neck without bringing it down on the spot. I have seen many a bird slacken speed at a hedge, give a bit of a lurch, and sink quietly to the earth—dead. The extra exertion of topping the hedge hurries the bird's collapse, and it usually turns slightly out of its line.

Shooting stories are almost as numerous and as remarkable as those of fishing. Here are some samples concerning a farmer, a parson, and a keeper respectively. I was not present when any of the incidents occurred. I credit the keeper's feat, having had the account from his own lips, also the deed done by the parson, he being my own father; but I must admit that the farmer's story needs some digestion, so I will tell it first. Strolling round the farm with his gun, the farmer had occasion to pass through a gap in a hedge, near which there was a heap of red ashes, the remains of a couch-fire. In these ashes a covey of partridges were taking a dust-bath, as partridges love to do. And so much were the birds enjoying themselves that they failed to notice the farmer's approach. He fired point-blank into their midst, and churned up a terrific cloud of dust. So soon as he was able to see anything, he saw that he had bagged the whole covey—sixteen. He picked up the birds and put them into his pockets, where they all revived. None had been hit by the shot. They were blinded by the dust.

The parson, on starting out one day to walk up partridges, made a vow in the form of a bet that he would bag the first bird he saw. One was soon seen, but far out of shot. In the recklessness of his despair at the prospect of losing the bet, he loosed off. The bird, of course unscathed, flew on, but straight into the wall of a cottage. It was picked up, duly bagged, and the bet was won. The keeper's story is that he, having been ordered to get three brace of partridges for the 'house,' had failed utterly, owing to the birds' wildness. He was a useful shot at walked-up birds, but simply could not look at them when driven; in fact, he never had hit a driven bird. However, after he and two under-keepers had tramped in vain for the best part of a day, it was resolved that they could not fare worse by trying a drive. So the keeper stationed himself behind a thick hedge, while the other two acted as drivers. Soon that sweet rumbling as of distant thunder told him that a good covey had been flushed. With his heart beating like a muffled drum, he listened to the whirr of wings. Evidently the birds were coming straight for him. The next moment the swish of wings told him they had turned along the other side of the hedge. He blazed both barrels through the hedge at a venture, and bagged three and a half brace.

It is not often that a partridge offers insult in return for intended injury. The mayor of a provincial town was invited to a partridge-drive. He came, and with him the air of ableness usually attached to so exalted a personage. Up to lunch-time evidence was entirely lacking that his worship had contributed anything to the bag. After the meal a solitary partridge came along straight for his head, which he ducked as he swung his gun in the direction of the bird, and fired. The bird took no heed, but calmly alighted on a railing behind the mayor, and within easy shot. There it sat—a glorious chance. Hastily he reloaded his gun; but, as his worship explained, just as he was about to shoot, the bird spread its wings, gave a derisive chirp, and flew away. A farmer told me the following story of his own resourcefulness and the mighty execution of his old gun: During a spell of hard weather he had spotted a 'rare mess of partridges' feeding round a corn-rick. He could not decide which section of the birds he should brown, since they seemed equally thick all round the rick. Finally he hit on this idea.

Having bent the barrel of his gun over his knee—in itself no mean feat—he half-filled it with shot, and let drive—and, he said, killed every partridge. Of course, I did not witness this performance. But the farmer lived to tell me of it.

The driving of partridges is the most difficult part of a keeper's work. But it gives a keeper scope. There is a fascination about driving—a something which gives a never-failing freshness to the same old fields and fences. It was my delight. Partridges are to be driven by a knowledge of their habits—by using one's brains as well as legs—not by luck; flags and beaters are merely organized accessories. This is the mistake made by most people who do not understand the partridge-play—to imagine that, given some ground and some partridges, the birds can be driven when and where it seemeth desirable. No man can drive partridges except where they are willing to go. Partridge-driving compared to the driving of pheasants is as chess compared to draughts. There are endless combinations and alternatives to be thought out and organized, to meet various directions and strengths of wind—not merely for a drive or two, but for a whole day's driving. On each drive depends, to a great extent, the success of the next, and thus of the whole day. However others might appreciate them, I never could enjoy happy-go-lucky driving. Since the best-planned schemes for driving partridges do not always turn out as well as they might, it should be obvious that haphazard drives can bring about the best results only by merest chance.

There is a popular fallacy about partridge-driving —that the results (in the shape of bag) obtained on big shoots are due to the personal skill of the keepers. This implies that the keepers in charge of small shoots are comparative duffers at driving. True, they may be, but not necessarily; or rather, the big-shoot keepers are not necessarily superior in skill to the small-shoot keepers. Again and again a small-shoot keeper has to bring into play more thought, judgment, and attention to details—and brains—than his brother on the large place. Often an individual drive on a small shoot is of maximum excellence when the only three or four coveys on the ground included in that drive are engineered over the guns; whereas on the large shoot a couple of hundred birds may escape the drivers and yet another two hundred go to the guns.

Therefore, to drive partridges on a big shoot is simple compared to driving them on a small extent of ground. In the latter case the controlling thought must be how not to lose your birds by letting them slip over the everlasting boundaries, and not so much how to get them over the guns, which is the far less complex aim of driving on an ample acreage. As it fell to my lot during most of my game-keeping career, not only to organize, but to carry out, partridge-drives over ground that made things difficult more on account of its conformation than its extent, I will give some of my experiences. I had about thirteen hundred acres of partridge fields, and if only they had lain together, without the intervention of permanent obstacles, I could have wished for no better scope for that part of my work, which I grew to regard more in the light of a hobby.

The village lay in the middle, the effect of which was that you could not get a to-and-fro drive on any of the divisions, unless it were early in the season and cover happened to be in exactly the right parts. And when, as more often than not was the case, there was no cover in which to concentrate the birds at the business-ends of the divisions—which, by reason of boundaries, made the drives wider than they were long—either one had to arrange the guns much too wide apart, or run considerable risk by squeezing the birds enough to get them over the frontage which the conventional party of guns could cover properly. Here is a point which many hosts of shooting-parties do not seem to understand. They fail to see how too few guns can spoil a partridge-drive, though they know well enough that if the guns at a covert shoot are too far apart, pheasants will escape between them without even rising. They argue—so many birds, so many guns;

therefore, the fewer the guns, the more shooting each will obtain, which in partridge-driving is entirely wrong, though it would not be if one had conveniently placed tapering pieces of cover from which to send the birds over the guns. Then four good guns would be a great deal better than a dozen duffers. But in the ordinary circumstances of partridge-driving, the most incompetent shooters are better than nothing at all, since they make things better for others. Driven partridges are difficult enough to hit at all times, and the straightest shooting is worse than useless when the birds are not within fair range. Forty yards is quite enough between guns, and less is often better. Though, theoretically at least, the first-barrel bird is taken in front, any number of shooters seldom fire at all till birds are past them; besides, the height of fences and of the birds frequently makes it impossible to get in a shot in front. Therefore, assuming that guns are sixty or seventy yards apart, even if it were permissible to fire down the line, birds passing half-way between two guns would be thirty yards off or more at the nearest point. That means it is not possible to get in the first barrel under forty yards; and a man would have to be a very good shot, very quick, and very lucky to get a brace.

So when guns are too few it means that half the birds which come on pass wide of a narrow frontage properly covered, or that packs of birds may pass practically unchallenged between guns spread over a wider frontage, to go on and remain unbroken up. One good pack, by meeting the fire of two or three guns, is likely to be split up, and if not given time to re-pack will provide a good day's sport and a respectable bag for shooters of ordinary skill. You must drive early enough if you would drive successfully for a whole day over a small extent of ground, or over a comparatively large acreage if cut up by villages, or of 'strippy,' irregular outline. In the matter of date people will imitate Lord So-and-so, of five hundred brace a day fame, only to find their sport and their bag more inferior than ever to his. Besides, by driving early you can have short drives off stubble, sainfoin, and other material available and sufficient for holding birds before they get too strong. Later on it is all very well for sportsmen to grumble and even rave about long drives and long waits; you may have short drives and short waits, and no shooting to speak of all day long. 'Where are the birds?' is the question put to the unfortunate keeper after each short drive. If ever I hated anything it was to be asked where my partridges were after somebody else had arranged the drives.

It may be suggested that the provision of two sets of beaters and competent men to manage them would allow the long drives necessary to success, without the guns having long waits; to which there might be objection on the score of expense, or absence of a reliable commander for a second gang of drivers, to say nothing of the fact that the extent of ground or the supply of partridges—probably both—render driving with two sets of beaters absurd. In any circumstances double driving must be very well managed, or all sorts of complications are more than likely to occur. A short drive late in the season may be successful occasionally, as when birds are known to be in a field of luxuriant cover, but to make a general practice of short drives after early October is to court failure. You will not even see half the birds which are on the ground, for either the guns going to their stands or the beaters getting round will put up prematurely most of the birds that already have not departed on legs or wings.

It fell to my lot a few years ago to be driving partridges on ground that was rather cut up and lay awkwardly. The day—high wind and rain—was dead against the results possible on the same ground in better weather. I began with a down-wind drive about half a mile long off some bare fields, on three sides of which were boundaries, so there was not much in the way of an alternative. A good lot of birds, like brown pebbles from a mighty sling, went well, though I could not see them reach the guns for rain. I was informed when the drive was over that one gun did not get a shot—I am quite sure this made no difference to his killing nothing—and that these long drives were not liked, and would be tolerated no more. The next drive I wanted to take was about five hundred yards in length, across the wind at right angles to the previous one, and consisted of one big field dotted with charlock plants—about one to every five square yards. On two sides of the field were boundaries. However, this would not do at all—though to my way of thinking there was no question of two opinions as to its being the right move.

I had intended a return drive (the third), to be followed by an up-wind drive (the fourth), which obviously would have included its own birds and those from the three preceding drives. I was ordered to take the beaters round as for my idea of the second drive of the day, but to bring them along half at a time—that is, to make two parallel drives of the charlock-pimpled field. I even was asked what I thought of the plan. I said that I thought it admirably devised to insure two blank drives instead of one good one, and to send many birds off the place. Still, I was ordered to carry it out, which I did, thinking that if anyone knew more than I did about my partridges and the driving of them, the fact ought to be advertised. And I was always willing to learn. We all learnt what it was like to have two blank drives in succession, save that a rook passed over the guns during the progress of the second. I waited for instructions as to the next drive. On it I have some sort of recollection of a small covey. The next was dead blank. Then came lunch-time. I hung back; my self-appointed instructor hung back. I explained that the best plans I could think of had been knocked irretrievably on the head, and that the day was ruined; but, provided there were no further interference (it was politeness alone that caused me to use a term so mild), I consented to do what I could to improve matters. After lunch we betook ourselves to a part of the shoot that had not been 'messed up,' and had some passable drives, getting birds broken up just as it was time to go home.

Many a good drive has been spoiled by an improper start. A shot or any sort of shooting off is not a good signal, even when there is a strictly enforced rule against shooting between drives; for you never know when someone unconnected with the party may not let fly, and one shot sounds very much like another. A proper signalling-horn, with two notes, is the best means of communication between the manager of the guns and the directors of beaters. Here is a word of advice—for the briefest moment do not let a horn get into the hands of an irresponsible person. I have noticed that those who are addicted to hunting possess very liberal and erratic ideas of horn-blowing when they are shooting. I have suffered much through the untimely blast of a horn, resulting on at least two occasions in the ruination of most promising drives just as the guns got to their places. Of course, if I could have seen the birds pass over where I knew the guns ought to have been, I should have stopped the beaters. As it was, I could not see; and being well aware beforehand that I should not be able to see, I had made extra special arrangements that I should drive on immediately the horn sounded. There was plenty of corroborative evidence that the horn had sounded, and the only reason that I could think of to account for no sound of shots was that the birds had turned off. Naturally, the horn-blower blamed everybody but himself.

There is nothing like really well-organized driving for showing what birds ground carries. It will show a surprising lot of birds on ground upon which those who do not know will tell you there are not any. I remember in the first season of my keepership going over my ground on the afternoon preceding the first day's driving with one of the guns. He appeared dreadfully sceptical at the prospect of getting the forty-brace bag I hinted at. He declared that there could not be any birds, since one covey of nine was all we saw. We got forty-five and a half brace (half being killed by one gun), exclusive of a runner alleged to have been manufactured by a gun who got rid of a big bag of cartridges without doing any further damage.

Many people fail to make anything like the use they might of the partridge's habit of getting back at the earliest moment to its usual haunts. This habit is most evident in the earlier part of the season. I remember driving successfully the same drive three times in one day, though never a bird was driven back to it. It was in early October, and the ground comprising the drive was so situated that it could be driven only in such a way that the birds were lost after passing over the guns. Literally, we drove that drive morning, noon, and night.

During the giving of instructions for a coming day one often hears a keeper admonished to be sure and get the birds driven into the roots and the beaters in their places, so that there shall be no delay in giving the guns something to do directly they reach their stands. This sounds very well, and is not very difficult to carry out—so far. But roots almost always are on the wet side so early in the morning, as those who have to go through them—and the partridges—fully appreciate. No keeper or beaters in the world can keep partridges in roots if they do not wish to stay there. Besides, at ten o'clock on an autumn morning the birds have not finished breakfast. Above all things in the shape of wet roots, partridges hate a solid mass of rape sown broadcast. I have seen hundreds of birds driven into such stuff—to save time—and almost every bird rise and clear out within five minutes. The result was that the beaters again had to go round some distance, and the guns, after all, had to wait much longer than if there had been no preliminary driving in.

Partridges will put themselves into dry roots readily enough—either when the sun is hot, for shade; or when there is a hard frost with a wind, for shelter; or when it rains very, very hard, for protection (by way of the lesser of two damp evils). There is no more likely place to find birds in very wet weather than in tall kale, for beneath its hanging leaves the birds can move without getting wet by contact with wet material. Swedes, which have sprawling leaves, much given to holding water, consequently are not likely to be patronized by partridges, unless dry. When driving is going on other than early in the season, it is well for guns not to lose time in getting to their places after the beaters start to get round a drive, even if it is a long one, and especially when the birds on the ground included in the drive have been driven on to it towards some barrier, such as a village. Often I have known birds to start coming when the beaters were only half-way to the base of a half-mile drive. Though red-legs are not of much use for walking up, it is only right that they should have a word of praise for their driving qualities; they will begin going over the guns in driblets so soon as a drive is started, fly straight, in a wind, fast enough and high enough for any man, and give the Englishmen a splendid lead.

Do not forget—if bag is an object—that ten partridges too tired to swerve are equal to a hundred fresh ones, whose pace and swerve make a few reputations, but destroy many.

CHAPTER VI

VERMIN AND TRAPPING

The worst pests—Poisoning rats—Rooks as robbers—Ten stoats and a silvery-white pheasant—Litters of stoats—Stoats and weasels and rats—Hawks—Hedgehogs—Jays as sentinels—Owls—Discrimination—Vermin without end.

'LET the keeper look after the vermin and the game will look after itself' is a saying which has stood the test of time. There is no more interesting phase of a keeper's work than the circumvention of vermin. Dull indeed would it be on a shoot where there is absolutely no vermin; one might as well use a gun which mechanically prevented missing. Though I had to do a lot of game-shooting, I enjoyed the all-round sport with vermin better. Often have I thought that I would like to get a keeper's berth where vermin teemed. I do not mean a place swarming with rats and rooks, but holding a good old-fashioned stock of all sorts of vermin.

Putting foxes on a pedestal apart, I found rooks and rats were the worst and most persistent pests with which I had to deal. It is said that if you kill one rat, half a dozen come to its funeral; but I expect they would come, funeral or no funeral. At any rate, the more rat funerals the better for game. I found that if I got my rats down very early in the spring, I was sure to have another stock by the time the pheasants and partridges were nesting, which, of course, is the time when rats do most damage, and when, for obvious reasons, you cannot do much to destroy them without doing nearly as much harm to game interests as would the rats themselves. My plan was to wait till the end of March. Where there are many rats—one way and another we destroyed about five thousand a year—there is only one way to make anything like a clean sweep of them, and that is by poisoning or otherwise dosing them. Trapping alone is useless, for while one is catching a score hundreds escape. I would make the most careful search for burrows or other signs of rats over every inch, so to speak, of my ground: this would take two of us ten days. Wherever we found the smallest sign of the work of rats we left ample medicine to go round, and for any tourists that might call in. Also, when a burrow showed no sign of present occupation, we would leave a meal ready for prospective tenants. To deal with rats successfully the treatment must be generous and thorough. It is useless to half poison them, or rather to poison half of them. Let the margin be always on the side of liberality—that is to say, distribute in the rat-holes more small doses of poison than you think there are rats. It is slovenly, and besides being useless, to put down a big lump of poison here and there, with the idea that the rats will come and share it amongst themselves. This is what happens: a big rat comes upon a large portion of poison, and feeds upon it, to the exclusion of would-be sharers of the fatal feast, and—dies, but not before he has eaten several times as much as was necessary to kill him. And so others must go short and—live. But when the poison is evenly and thickly distributed in small but sufficient portions, all the rats thereabouts may get a taste, and having got it, are likely to be unable to search for more. The only case in which it is advisable to put down a bumper dose in one spot is when you find a burrow containing a tribe of ratlets, which, when they begin to run out, are in the habit of using one hole.

I remember dressing a thick ivy-grown hedge, in which I reckoned there were at least two hundred rats. On one side there was wheat about a foot high, which the rats looked like clearing; they nipped off the stems, fed on the joints, and left the rest to waste. I took much time and trouble not to leave a single hole undressed. And it paid me: for they were the only strong colony of rats on that farm, having been attracted by the holding

All hands to the rats.

Mistress of the situation.

over of some wheat-stacks. By the following morning I do not think one rat remained alive.

The reason for the wholesale dressing of rat-haunts not too long before the game-birds begin to nest is that the presence of rat corpses in the burrows deters immigrating relatives from tarrying just long enough to allow the birds to hatch in peace. Apart from the obvious reason, why I insist so strongly on liberality at the first dosing is that those rats which otherwise would have to go short will not be over-keen to accept a second invitation, after observing the dismal fate of their brethren. Provided that I could keep my ground clear of rats till the birds had hatched, I had to consider myself lucky, since there were tens of thousands of rats on the neighbouring farms, on two of which the farmers seemed indifferent to their presence. During the thrashing of the corn in a barn on one of these farms, within five hundred yards of some of my best partridge ground, seventeen hundred rats were killed. Perhaps the farmer kept them out of false economy, since he used them as fuel for making steam when threshing.

I lost hundreds of eggs every year by rooks, besides probably as many more that I knew nothing of; and little pheasants up to ten days old on the rearing-field had to be guarded constantly—or one might find that rooks had left only bits of fluff and the legs of a score or so.

In this way jackdaws are worse than rooks, for they have a great fancy for the brains of pheasant chicks, which on occasion they will kill when almost as big as themselves. I have heard ot localities where rooks are still innocent of meddling with the eggs or young of game. No doubt rooks vary in degree of crime against game, but the best of those with which I have been associated were bad enough. Many a time has the damage done by rooks been so wholesale and so irreparable that I have wished that I could gather all the rooks within a radius of a hundred miles into a confined mass, and open fire till the last was dead. Of course, I did not always feel like that. I love as much as anybody their cawing at the coming of spring—when the daisies open wide, the hum of mowing is heard again on the lawns, and the buzz of bees among the flaming crocuses.

Some say that rooks may steal only a few early pheasant eggs here and there, while as yet the herbage has made no headway, and the eggs lie exposed and tempting. Of course, the easier it is for rooks to see eggs, the easier is it for them to find them; but at all times it is easier for rooks than for men to find eggs, for they can look down on them. Get on a hillside from which you can look down on a dense wood, and you will be surprised at its bareness from the vertical view-point. Not until the days when aeroplanes are as cheap as bicycles will the keeper be able to compete with rooks at finding eggs on anything like equal terms. Even then rooks would have the advantage: for what they cannot see through they can walk beneath easily, to say nothing of a theory that rooks, like all other creatures, have eyes that magnify, so that objects appear to them several times larger than to the eyes of men. In any case, the eyes of a rook are infinitely keener than those of a man. Some rooks are worse than others at stealing eggs and young game. I am certain that when once a rook has tasted an egg it never loses a chance of doing so again, and the older it gets the more cunning it becomes at finding eggs. You may be sure a rook is an experienced egg-thief when you see it beating along a hedge, or over a wood or a field, with bill pointing this way and that, as its eyes pry into everything. Evidently rooks find peewits' eggs comparatively as difficult to find as do men, for they are to be seen quartering a peewit-haunted field only about a yard from the ground.

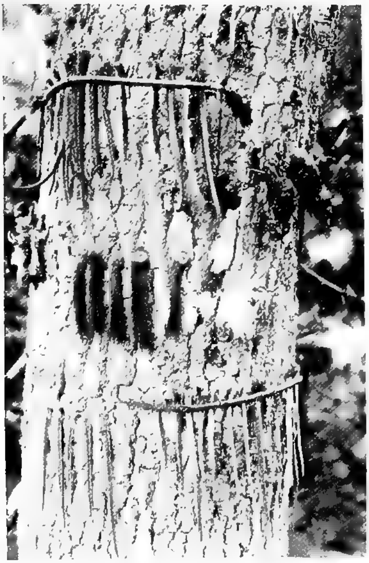
To show how cunning and persevering rooks become in their search for eggs, when walking along a dense hedge I often have heard a flapping of dusky wings within, and so have ended the career of many an arch-robber of nests. This is good evidence that, with all their cunning and instinct of self-preservation, rooks do not reason, since birds in the circumstances just related surely would lie low instead of inviting almost certain doom by flopping out under the muzzle of a gun. At one time I had a joint interest in the eggs of pheasants in a large open pen. But if either the other man or myself were not on guard all day, we got very little except shells. The rooks would sit on the trees and wait for each egg to be laid; then down they would swoop, and the wherewithal for a glorious rocketer was gone in a twinkling. The next year the pen was covered in with string-netting. After the pheasants had laid the eggs required they were turned out. The rooks had waited long and patiently for their turn to come, and it was resolved that they should have it. The door of the pen was left open, and a trail of egg-shells laid to a fuller supply well within the enclosure. A vengeance-seeking keeper with a short stick came swiftly round a corner, and in a very short time there were thirty-seven rooks less to steal his eggs.

It would not be so bad if rooks were content with a few of the early pheasant eggs: often enough some of these are frosted, and could well be spared. If only rooks would exercise their cunning by distinguishing between frosted eggs and others, they would be only too welcome to the spoiled eggs for their trouble. True, early-laying pheasants whose eggs are destroyed have the chance of better luck with a second nest; but the days come when many a hen pheasant is rendered chickless for the season, days when the sap runs in the oaks, and myriads of caterpillars, which keepers call palmers, hatch, and foul the fresh oak-leaves with their feasting. Then come to the woods great flocks of rooks, with their sons and daughters, and all manner of relations. And though there is other food enough and to spare, nest after nest of pheasant eggs is destroyed, and the young innocent rooks are led into the evil of their elders. The pheasants which come to share the caterpillar feast love to nest beneath the heads of the felled oaks.

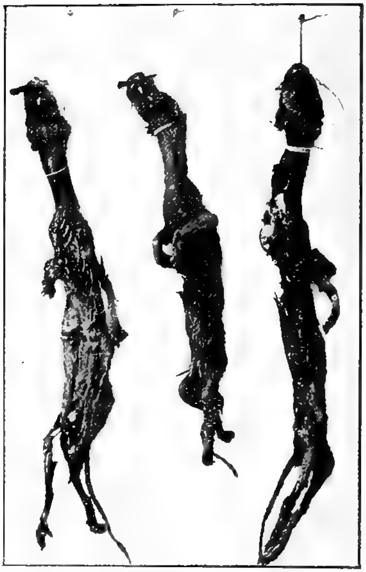
I have been told that partridge eggs are safe from rooks, because they are so carefully covered up when the nest is left. So they are, during the laying period. But rooks are artful enough to take stock of the goings to and fro of nest-owning partridges; besides, I think one may trust the ordinary rook to recognize a partridge nest when he sees it (however well covered are the eggs) quite as easily as does a keeper. When partridges are sitting is the most annoying time for rooks to destroy their nests, especially when the clutches of eggs have been added to by the keeper, who may have walked scores of weary extra miles to rescue the added eggs from nests in risky sites. To make matters worse, rooks find the 'setty' eggs of partridges more easily than when 'cold' (as keepers call eggs in which incubation has not started), because, when a sitting bird leaves her nest, she does not cover up her eggs. These, having become smoothed and polished from being sat upon, the more easily catch the glint of the sun, and therefore the eye of rooks. It seems curious at first sight that partridges should cover up their cold eggs, but leave fully exposed those which are being incubated. The reason, I think, must be that the birds' instinct has been so ordered by Nature to carry out her rule—that 'setty' eggs must be allowed to cool and to absorb oxygen, for the strengthening and successful hatching of the embryos.

One may distinguish between the egg-stealing work of a solitary rook and that of a company of the rascals. A solitary rook does not hurry, and will carry an egg to some open spot with the idea (presumably) of enjoying it in safety, and does not take all the eggs in a nest, unless they are very few, on one occasion. But when a nest is discovered by a band of the robbers, very short work is made of it, and the keeper is likely to find left only a few pieces of shell near the ransacked nest. Anyone who has watched a whole tribe of rooks mobbing a sitting partridge cannot fail to sympathize with her, whether in sympathy with partridge-shooting or not. For cowardly persistency the sight were hard to match. One rook catches sight of the neat little bird sitting on her treasures, and gives a gleeful squawk; then, with a regular fanfare of squawking, its egg-thirsty companions gather round the nest. Yet somehow or another they seem to hesitate to start on their unholy feast, though they strut around with a great show of boldness and much more squawking. The partridge has hissed at them! A little partridge hen, save for a bit of a beak weaponless, but full of quiet pluck, has refused to leave her post at the demand of a score or so of robbers, each with a bill powerful enough to brain her at a blow, but each in a blue-black funk. Again the partridge hisses and ruffles her feathers. The foremost of the besieging throng feels it an unwise honour to lead the attack, and flops into the air to take a safer place behind its clamouring comrades, and squawks the more vigorously that the business should be proceeded with. At last, worn out by the cowardly buffetings of the merciless throng, the partridge is evicted from her nest, and with a wrangling chorus of triumphant squawks the villains guzzle the eggs. That is when I could use an automatic gun. When I did get a chance at a rookery, much as I hated the job as sport, I did things thoroughly. This reminds me of a lucky coincidence. The owner of a rookery had let too many young rooks fly away—at least, I thought so—and as I was passing a clump of trees in one of my fields in the late evening out flopped a young rook straight towards me. Down he went smartly, and another, and another, and likewise every one of the seventeen young rooks that were in that clump. The curious thing was that they gave me just time to load; never more than two came together, and all persisted in flying straight towards me, when safety and their birthplace lay in the opposite direction. My seventeenth and last cartridge accounted for the seventeenth and last rook.

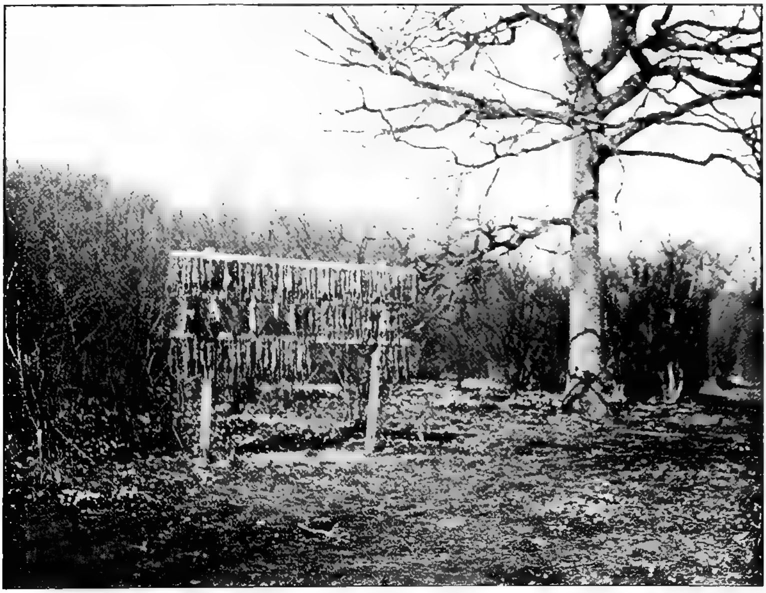
What I liked best in my war against vermin was a family stoat-hunt. In this I was of the same mind as an old keeper whom I had known ever since I was old enough to get into mischief. This old fellow told me he would walk ten miles any day to 'attend to' a litter of stoats. I was always ready to go with him. Six or seven is the usual number of stoats in a litter, though nearly twenty have been found, with every indication that all belonged to one mother. The most I ever found was ten. And there is attached to this litter of ten a scrap of history which made their circumvention of special interest to me. Through all one shooting season I had succeeded in preserving a very beautiful silvery-white hen pheasant. Not having seen her for many weeks, I naturally was delighted when I saw her sitting on one of the nests I found at the end of May. All went well for a while, till one Sunday morning, when I went to have a look at



A condensed 'gallows.'



Naturally mummified stoats, after ten years' exposure to all weathers.



An ordinary 'gallows.'

her, with a view to a photograph, I saw before I got near the nest that something was radically wrong. 'Stoats,' I said to myself, and had a look round. They had not interfered with the eggs, which, of course, were spoiled. I could see where the soft grass had been pressed aside in furrows as the spoilers had passed on their tour of destruction. Following in their wake, I saw where they had spread out as if scenting prey, or had paused to enjoy a gambol through a hollow stump or round a tree-trunk. Their direction told me where they would be certain to take lodging—in a large solitary bavin-pile on the edge of a broad ride.

Monday morning came, and two indignant keepers who had set great store on the nest of that silvery-white pheasant went forth, each with a gun and a pocketful of cartridges, and accompanied by the best little terrier that ever lived. We went to the scene of the ruined nest. We did not weep over it, but, having kindled our anger afresh, decided to track down those stoats, even to the extent of trespassing in other people's woods. We knew well enough, we thought, where to go, so that we should have come upon them straightway—in the bavin-pile by the broad ride. Perhaps there is something of the cat-and-mouse business about keepers. So we bored our way through the underwood, till, following those furrowy tracks in the soft grass, we came to the pile, and said to each other simultaneously. 'Here they are!' just as if we had expected them to be anywhere else. There were several hundred bavins to be moved, but luckily the surroundings for a few yards were open enough to see a stoat. By the way, if a wood-pile cannot or must not be moved, a good 'ruxing' with a long pointed rod will induce stoats to steal away. We spurned the question of anything other people might have to say about the moving of these bavins; we did not mean to let off one of these stoats that had assaulted our silvery-white pheasant.

So we set to work to move the bavin-pile, putting the little terrier at the far end to prevent premature bolting, and our guns, loaded, within easy reach. When we had moved about half the bavins we began to catch glimpses of lithe, darting forms in a great state of excitement. I changed places with the terrier, sending her back to help my companion keep the stoats forward. I had bowled over five, when the remainder of the bavin-pile collapsed, and the rest of the stoats broke back into the shifted bavins. We had all our work to do over again. But we got five more stoats, all full-grown. I missed the last one, either from over-anxiety or over-confidence; still, I did miss it, and was immensely relieved to see my companion 'wipe my eye,' for he had many tables of this sort to turn on me. We had got the whole litter—ten of them. So was the silvery-white pheasant avenged.

A road-mender, one of Nature's sportsmen, who helped me with ferreting and so forth, came to me one morning to say he was coming up a footpath along the edge of one of my woods, and had 'jest ketch'd eye on some stooats over agenst' a small bavin-pile. Road-work had to go for a while, and we were very soon down there. The first stoat to bolt was the crafty old mother, and I missed her by a hair's-breadth, owing to her diving through some leaves with which we had stopped a hole in a rabbit's burrow. Having taken precautions that this should not occur again, I got a sequence of eight young stoats, bigger than their mother. It is a curious thing, but if you can secure the mother of a grown-up litter of stoats you can trap them to her, with ease and certainty; but it is quite another matter to trap a mother stoat to her dead family. However, in this case I had to try, and as it turned out the mother stoat came very near proving the exception to the rule.

I had brought with me a trap that worked particularly well, and set it to the eight young stoats, so that if their mother came to them she would run the gravest risk of having to stay with them. But come she did during the following night, and, what is more, she removed the whole of her family without throwing the trap, or even disarranging the palisade of twigs. I thought a human being must have removed the bodies. Anyway, I saw no more of that old stoat, and thought she had eluded me altogether. But one morning, a week afterwards, while I was coming down a ride a couple of hundred yards from the scene of the mysterious removal, my terrier stood in no uncertain way at a small pile of bavins. I had just started to roll the bavins apart as best I could with my right hand, keeping my gun cleared for action with the left, when out whipped a stoat, and I blew off her head. Being curious to see what plunder she had beneath the bavins, I moved them, and there were the eight young stoats I had lost. Think of the labour of carting them, each one bigger than herself, a distance of two hundred yards!

Once, having secured part of a litter of stoats, and having set traps for the rest, I was waiting a while to watch if anything happened, well knowing that if only I could get the mother, to secure her family would be easy. After about ten minutes, I caught sight of her on the end of a birch log, and since there was no prospect of a better chance, I had a go at her at a good fifty yards. She dived into a rabbit-hole without the least sign of being hit. But the next morning she was in a trap baited with two of her young ones, in spite of a broken thigh. The reason why, up to the time when the litter breaks up, it is easy to trap young stoats to their defunct mother seems to be that, although they long since have ceased to obtain milk from her they still rely upon her to catch them food. So when she is dead, and fails to bring them any more food, they make a meal of her without any symptom of disgust. I had caught a mother stoat in a tunnel trap, at the end of a hedgerow, as she was leading her bloodthirsty family into one of my woods. Some carters were ploughing in the adjoining field, and, as is the way of carters while at lunch, one of them took a stroll. Coming to where my trap was, he saw three large young stoats eating their mother; and so intent were they upon their cannibal feast that the man killed them all with a stick, two at the same blow.

Litters of stoats are to be found in disused or 'blind' rabbit-burrows, but bavin-piles or any stacks of wood are their favourite lodging. It is easy to tell without a dog whether stoats are using a bavin-pile or burrow in summer-time; there will be much the same evidence of play as around a spot where there are fox cubs, but in miniature, and without those strewn remnants of game which as heated irons pierce the soul of the gamekeeper. The sight of a litter of stoats in full play about a small pile of bavins is worth watching: a sort of glorified game of hide-and-seek it is, as they dart in and out with the speed of lightning and the lithesomeness of vipers.

A stoat will always bolt before a ferret. The slight advantage which an ordinary ferret possesses in strength is counterbalanced by a stoat's activity. I should say that a pitched battle between a stoat and a ferret would be a right royal contest, though doubtless the result would depend on whichever got first grip in a vital part. I know of one instance only in which a stoat failed to bolt before a ferret, for the very sufficient reason that the ferret killed it. I had lined a dog ferret of ordinary size into a rabbit-burrow, and as he hung tightly to something, I dug after him. There were no more signs of a struggle than a ferret and rabbit usually make—not even a chatter of anger. When I reached the ferret he had eaten several mouthfuls of a large dog stoat which evidently he had just killed, and near them lay a dead rabbit, also just killed. Either the ferret and stoat had fought for the rabbit, or the stoat had failed to get past the ferret, the part of the burrow in which they were being a cul-de-sac.

A stoat chased by a dog, or bolted by a ferret, or knowing that it is otherwise hunted, offers the most difficult shot I know of—going like a streak, bounding onwards and leaping in a most puzzling zigzag way at the same time, so as to make its real direction difficult to follow, even in a clear space. Both stoats and weasels are of a curious disposition. For instance, when, alarmed but not pursued, they have sought refuge in a hole, they are no sooner inside than they will appear at the entrance; but so quick are they that as a rule it is impossible to get your gun up and off before they retreat. I have shot many a stoat and weasel by training my gun on a hole, and pulling the instant the creature appeared.

Viewing the question as impartially as I can, I am against the idea that if stoats and weasels were preserved there would be no rat plagues. Probably there would be fewer rats, but I think imperceptibly fewer, unless stoats and weasels became so numerous (and rabbits, upon which they chiefly prey, so scarce) that they would prove as great, or a greater, pest than rats. And besides, stoats and weasels would be inclined, in so far as they were inclined at all to attack rats, to deal with the least objectionable rats—those farthest away from the habitations of men—instead of those of which it is most desirable to be rid. Stoats and weasels seldom attack an old rat, though they will go for young rats when non-combative prey is not available. A mother rabbit, though occasionally she will succeed in driving a stoat away from her little rabbits, at her worst is nothing to a mother of rats. Is it likely, therefore, that a stoat or a weasel, by collaring a young rat, would run the risk of a fight to the death with its mother, when for the sake of a little trouble, and with slight risk of a kick or a scratch, young or old rabbits may be had? Rats never attack stoats and weasels of any age in cold blood, but only when they themselves or, much more often, their young are assaulted. Frequently I have found nests both of young stoats and weasels in a rick holding rats—on one occasion a nest containing nine little stoats, with eyes not yet open, in a wheat-rick, from which and another next to it we made a bag of over five hundred sizable rats. I believe, however, that young stoats and weasels are removed from rat-infested lodgings before they are old enough to get into hot water in the absence of their parents. I remember catching an old weasel and an old rat in a trap at the same time. It was set at the corner of a corn-rick, and the rat was caught by the near hind-leg and the weasel by the near front-leg; but whether the weasel meant to eat the rat or was driving it from its little weasels, I cannot say. I think if stoats and weasels really were the conquerors of rats, as some allege, rats would not stay with them a moment longer than they could help, in a rick or elsewhere.

Stoats that have young ones to provide for kill a large number of rabbits, chiefly small ones just able to run. They destroy also a large number of pheasants and partridges by ruining their nests, though they are very seldom successful in catching the sitting birds. Once while I was kneeling down more closely to examine a ruined partridge nest, with the toe of one of my boots over a shallow rut in an old cart-way, I felt a smart blow, and heard a ghastly shriek. The guilty stoat had returned, and saved me further investigation of clues. Stoats will often remove and store in the lair of their litter scores of game eggs; but, curiously enough, they leave uneaten probably nine out of every ten they so take. Once an egg is broken stoats relish the contents as keenly as do ferrets, yet while removing eggs they are most careful not to break them. I believe the explanation of their not eating stolen eggs is that they cease to recognize them as fit for food after the scent of the sitting bird has left them. I have recovered from the lairs of stoats lots of eggs in which incubation had not started, hatched them under fowls, and reared birds from them after all.

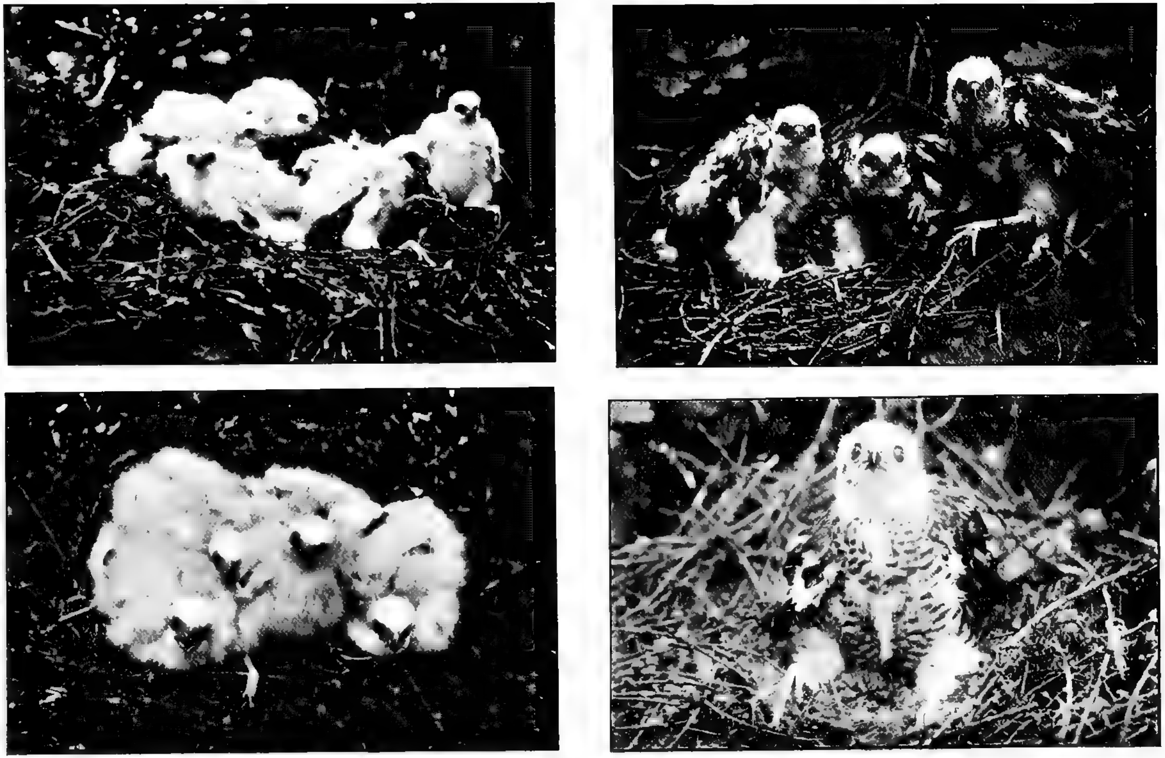
An under-keeper complained to me that fourteen 'cold' pheasant eggs had disappeared from a nest under some brushwood where the underwood had been cut the previous winter, and he was certain that the thief was a human being. I went with him to reconstruct the crime. There, right enough, was the empty nest—not one of the dead oak-leaves on which the eggs had rested disturbed; nor could I trace a sign of a human footprint. I knelt down, and was feeling round the edge of the nest when my finger went into a mole-hole, and against something hard and round and smooth. I retrieved all the fourteen eggs from that mole-hole, asked for a trap, set it in the nest (with twigs above to keep out pheasants), and soon laid by the legs a fine dog stoat. This same under-keeper learnt another lesson about stoats that he had not forgotten up to the last time I saw him. He thrust his arm into a rabbit-stop without previous scrutiny, and an old stoat fixed him by the hand.

The only hawks now commonly seen—at least, in North Hampshire—are kestrels and sparrow-hawks, though I did see two marsh-harriers. I averaged for ten years on the same ground three nests of kestrels and two of sparrow-hawks, and they never did any noticeable damage to the game. Still, very occasionally a pair of kestrels with a family to provide for will discover that a field full of helpless young pheasants provides an easy solution to their catering difficulties. Then you cannot blame a keeper for taking preventive steps; otherwise, apart from the breaking of the law, kestrels ought to be preserved. Nor do sparrow-hawks inflict damage on game to a degree anything like proportionate to the zeal with which their destruction is sought; though they, like kestrels, are liable to play the duece with young game-birds when they do set about them.

Sparrow-hawks possess the habit, so often fatal to themselves, of returning again and again to the same part of a rearing-field, even to the same coop; whereas kestrels will swoop on a bird in any part, and so render their invasions much more difficult to terminate than those of the sparrow-hawk. By way of compensation, perhaps, kestrels are not liable to take game-birds except when they are small; sparrow-hawks, on the other hand, will boldly attack any bird they can kill and carry, and so are liable, but not likely, to prove a scourge to the keeper after he has shifted his birds to covert.

Since kestrels are famous for killing rats and mice (and, I think, much prefer to deal with mice), I do not see why on occasion they should not kill small leverets. One morning in the month of March I came upon a leveret just killed, by the side of a track through some young wood ; blood was oozing from its head, but not as if a stoat or weasel had bitten it. I set a trap to it, in which, returning in about ten minutes, I found a kestrel. I reset the trap, and very soon caught that kestrel's mate. I have seen a cock sparrow-hawk fly away from the carrion carcass of a rat, which evidently it had been eating. Another sparrow-hawk, a hen, I came upon as it was eating a greenfinch in the bottom of a dell when a winter wind was blowing. A French partridge flew across the corner of a wood, and I shot it ; just as I pulled the trigger a sparrow-hawk arrived, evidently in pursuit, so I got rather an unusual right and left. Another sparrow-hawk, an adult bird, did a funny thing. I was sitting in a hut in a clump of trees waiting for pigeons. The hawk came in and perched behind the trunk of a Scotch fir. A few minutes afterwards a pigeon came, and I shot it sitting in a tree within a few yards of the sparrow-hawk, which never budged till I went to pick up the pigeon. I relate the following account of an extraordinary coincidence, in the hope of helping the sparrow-hawk to make a name as a bird of omen. Just as I had entered a disused cattle-shed, into which I had not been for years and years, a pigeon flew in with a sparrow-hawk in close pursuit. The very same thing had occurred, I remembered, many years before, the last time I had shot with a man, just as we had entered this shed for lunch. I reached home to find that a telegram had been received announcing the man's death abroad.

I must confess that I was once badly hoaxed by a brood of sparrow-hawks that were just able to sit about on the branches of a larch-tree, in which was their nest. My ears caught a sound of distant mewing coming from a certain part of a big wood, and, having my gun with me, I proceeded to investigate. There was no doubt that I was getting nearer and nearer to the mewing, and at last I felt certain I was within ten yards of the cause, which I never dreamt was other than kittens. But I could see neither kittens nor any sign of them. I almost had persuaded myself that there was something in the ghost theory, and that perhaps the cats, whose blood was on my head, had conspired together against me. But there was a flutter above, and, peering through the canopy of hazel-leaves, I beheld the six young sparrow-hawks which had mocked me.



YOUNG SPARROW-HAWKS.

It is the habit of young sparrow-hawks at this age to mew for food precisely like kittens in sore distress.

Here is an instance of the thoughtless killing of a hawk by a keeper. I was walking with an old keeper through one of his woods, and he was just telling me how his pheasants had been entirely free from attack by hawks, when I caught sight of that lime-washing which tells the story of a hawk's brood above. I volunteered to climb a tall larch, three-quarters of the way up which was the nest. No sooner had I started to admire half a dozen young kestrels than bang! went the old fellow's gun at a parent hawk swooping round my head. Fortunately, only the hawk was bagged.

Neither shall I forget the first wounded sparrow-hawk which I handled, and I warn the inexperienced to be careful. It was a large female, and she was only winged. She struck her talons, each most horribly sharp and long, into my fingers, so that the more I tried to free them the worse it was. I will not try to remember how eventually I got them free of that terrible grip. But I have much pleasure in recording that a sign of a game-bird was most exceptional among the hosts of bird-victims brought to the hawk nestlings on my ground; nor do I think it can be proved that either sparrow-hawks or kestrels collectively take tribute of game for a tithe of the year's food.

Hedgehogs are far more numerous, and do far more harm to game nests, than most people imagine. One may detect the work of a hedgehog at a nest by the clumsy havoc—there is the wide passage through the herbage, and the eggs are partly eaten and the remains mixed with the rooted-up material of the nest (which seems to suggest that the insects that lurk beneath the nest are thought as much of as the eggs). Still, there is no getting away from the fact that a hedgehog invariably falls to an egg-bait pure and simple. Though eggs or carrion answer admirably, there is no bait more effective for trapping hedgehogs than the carcasses of those hogs that have gone before. In fairness to hedgehogs, it should be stated that they come more freely to matured than to fresh bait, not only because of the former's stronger scent, but for the sake of the maggots it produces and the beetles it attracts. All the same, this is not evidence that hedgehogs do not like eggs, and even birds. I heard of a proved instance in which a hedgehog attacked pheasants in a coop, and killed the fowl foster-mother by gnawing out her entrails. During my first season as a keeper of pheasants I found there were many hedgehogs in the woods. I got a hundred and forty odd that season. One tunnel-trap at an angle of one of the coverts accounted for forty-four. There passed by this trap a ride, up which people were not supposed to walk, so I set to work to print HEDGEHOGS in an elaborate design with the ones I caught, and made splendid progress till a lady trespasser lodged a complaint at headquarters. Though I was ordered to desist, the lady did not come that way again, nor the dear dog that usually accompanied her. Hedgehogs have a bad habit of camping out in the field-hedges when the partridges are nesting. A well-schooled dog is the best means of getting rid of them quickly. I had an old retriever who brought me eleven hedgehogs out of one short hedge, and I never knew her to upset a sitting bird during the whole of her life.

I regret to say that the last surviving pair of magpies in the locality where I was keepering were picked up in 1909 by a keeper (not myself)—that is to say, they were not trapped or shot, but poisoned. Utterly to exterminate birds so handsome may save a trifle of game for the gun, but surely such extremes of preservation can only bring upon the perpetrators the derision and disgust of all sane people. A judicious thinning of hawks and magpies is quite enough to satisfy the demands of any sportsman, and their extinction is bound to react to the detriment of the selfish few. In many parts jays, too, are getting comparatively scarce, though I am glad to say that, like stoats and weasels, they are too cunning ever to be wiped out by fair means. No sane keeper would wish to be without a sprinkling of jays in his woods, for he has no more vigilant and useful sentinels. In a wood where there are jays, neither cat nor fox nor man can stir without being spotted and proclaimed. Jays also take a somewhat uncalled-for delight in mobbing a barn-owl should it get abroad in the day-time.

The cunning of jays is shown particularly in their breeding-time. You may hunt high and low, till your neck aches as if it were going to break, for a jay's nest which you know must be in a certain wood, and not find it; yet you may pass within a yard or so of it. You may see the old jays about day after day, and they may utter a derisive squawk every time, but never a sound will they make near their nest. Nor do young jays ever squawk, unless actually molested, till they are out of the nest and can fly. Then they make any amount of noise. If jays made a practice of eating pheasants' eggs, it would be almost impossible to have any wild-bred pheasants, unless there were very few jays indeed or very many hen pheasants. In other words, when jays do take it into their heads to suck pheasants' eggs, they keep it up at a marvellous rate. In one season, in one wood, I lost over two hundred pheasants' eggs, their shells (each with a neat hole through which the contents had been sampled) remaining in the nests. I came to the conclusion that it was the work of jays, and rightly; for so soon as I had trapped a pair of jays to pheasants' eggs my losses entirely ceased, at which I was not sorry. Rabbits' eyes or sheep's eyes—in fact, any sort of eyes—are very attractive baits for jays, provided the trap is skilfully hidden. But the best bait that I know of is a piece of the yellow fat from the interior of a fowl. This reminds me that once, while resetting a trap to such a bait, after catching a jay, I caught my little finger in its four-inch jaws.

When it is desirable to thin jays, it is a capital plan, and both sporting and speedy, to take out a tame specimen and a gun to likely parts of the woods. To your bird's squawks the wild ones will come, and give you a shot or two at a stand. You must be ready and pretty smart to hit the jays, as they come silently and swiftly—it is just a flash of blue, white, and purple, and they are come and gone. Failing a live jay, a useful imitation call may be produced by a laurel-leaf and one's own lips. But there is nothing to equal the genuine squawk. Jays chiefly are responsible for the emptiness of so many pigeons' nests, and there is nothing like a sprinkling of jays for checking the increase of home-bred pigeons. Unfortunately, jays are even more fond of rifling the nests of turtle-doves, which do as much good as pigeons do harm.

Some owls occasionally kill young pheasants (even when they are big as old partridges), while others sometimes frighten them; therefore, all owls ought to be slain. So reason many keepers who ought to know better. The truth is this: few owls do any harm at all to game, and all owls do far more good than harm. The short-eared owls, by preying on young game, may incur the wrath of the keeper in the North, where they breed, but seeing that in the South these owls appear only when there is no young game, there is no case against them. The worst evidence I ever heard brought against the barn-owl was that one was found in possession of a dead pheasant chick, though there seemed to be considerable doubt as to how it came by it. It is certain, however, that where barn-owls forage in the vicinity of young pheasants, after they go to roost, they are apt to frighten them. The tawny, brown, or wood, and the long-eared owls are the only ones against which may be brought just accusation of killing game. Of the two, the long-eared sort is the most ferocious, certainly in appearance. I had shifted a batch of pheasants to covert, which an assistant was to look after. The man came to me the morning following the birds' first night in covert, and said there must be stoats on the war-path, for he had found a bird with its head off. I went to investigate. There was no doubt about the bird's head being off, and the flesh was picked off the neck, which told me that the crime had not been committed by stoats. The body of the bird lay at the edge of the ride, and at dusk I set a trap to it, leaving instructions that it was to be thrown at daybreak next morning, if necessary, so as not to catch the pheasants. When I saw my assistant's face beaming with triumph, I asked him how many stoats had been caught. He replied: 'Ne'er a one; but we've bin an' ketch'd the dev'l'—who turned out to be a long-eared owl. And no more pheasants were decapitated.

The brown owl also is not above attacking young pheasants, and at night will knock them out of the trees. Whichever of the two owls tries a diet of pheasant, it is likely to continue its depredations, though it has the decency, as a rule, to kill only one bird a night. While owls may kill only a few birds themselves, the chief charge against them is that they drive many from their perch, to spend the rest of the night on the ground at the mercy of foxes, and any vermin on the prowl. And seeing that the keeper sets great store on the night when all his birds 'go to tree,' his wrath when they are frightened from their perches is excusable. Still, it is well for the keeper, when he sees an owl of the criminally inclined sort, to stay his hand, and to reflect that sufficient unto the night is the evil thereof.

Reviewing the vermin question as a whole—that is, first, What vermin prey largely on game? and, second, What creatures prey on it only occasionally? —I admit that there is much room for improvement in the attitude of keepers. However, I am certain that since education means enlightenment, and modern preservation and shooting demand keepers of better education than formerly, the time is not far distant when all keepers will be men of education, and, therefore, of enlightenment. In this way, and in no other, will come about a rational discrimination in the matter of creatures now so often slaughtered indiscriminately as vermin. What the thinking keeper of to-day resents is that all keepers should be tarred with the sins of individuals; but so long as the world lasts gamekeepers will continue to complain that there is no visible end to vermin, whether it be clothed in feathers or fur.

CHAPTER VII

PHEASANTS: IN PEACE

Why keepers prefer pheasants to partridges—Advantages of pheasants over partridges—Comparisons of nesting habits—Hand-rearing—Ups and downs—The keeper as doctor—Short-tailed pheasants not appreciated—Peeling eggs—An explanation.

THE pheasant is the apple of the keeper's eye. For the sake of his pheasants he will suffer all things—even unto death. When he is ill his thoughts are not of himself, but of his pheasants; wet and weary, he will walk miles to tend them. It is said that one keeper shot all the nightingales in his woods, lest their singing should disturb the slumber of his pheasants. He would have been just the man for Nero of Rome. At any rate, most keepers live chiefly for pheasants, and several have died in their cause.

I do not wish to appear unfair or prejudiced toward pheasants—they have their place as birds of distinction and value; but, except in the matter of grandeur of plumage, in my estimation they must take second place to partridges. Apart from their glorious feathers, which, unfortunately, are of no value as food, pheasants, bird for bird, are worth four times as much as partridges so far as bulk of food is concerned; but this gain over partridges in quantity is cancelled by the flavour of the smaller birds. There must be some very cogent reasons for the very manifest preferential love which keepers have for pheasants. I think there are two reasons. Firstly, that one pheasant, alive or dead, is equal in size to four partridges, and, therefore, is equally conspicuous; and since the keeper gains credit chiefly for that which is conspicuous, every pheasant that he shows brings him as much credit as four partridges. Secondly, because of the ease with which so many pheasants practically may be assured by means of hand-rearing; and because even wild-bred pheasants are not nearly so much at the mercy of the weather in the breeding season as are partridges—they offer a surer means of gaining credit, or, at least, of retaining that already gained.

It is sufficiently obvious that hand-reared pheasants possess advantages over wild-bred birds; but it will be well to explain what I mean by saying that wild-bred pheasants are not so much at the mercy of the weather during the breeding season as are partridges. Pheasants begin to lay early in April, and go on much later than partridges, which begin early in May, and, except when they lose their first clutch of eggs shortly after completion, seldom lay again. Besides, ninety out of a hundred partridge eggs that fare so well as to hatch are hatched during the few days on either side of Midsummer Day, the period of hatching varying slightly according to the locality and the forwardness or backwardness of the season. And so a few days of cold wet weather, or even a few heavy rain-storms, coming when the little partridges are less than ten days old, may not only decimate the broods, but destroy them wholesale. A rain-storm coming in the day-time is especially disastrous to foraging partridge chicks, which it overwhelms before they can reach the shelter of their parents. Storms at night are comparatively harmless.

Another pull that wild-hatched pheasant chicks possess over little partridges is that the woods and spinneys, which are their natural haunts, besides being warmer than the open fields, offer better protection from wet, and a ground-surface not given to holding water, so that young birds can get about and feed in comparative comfort. All the same, a pheasant chick does not enjoy some of the advantages of the little partridge in this way. The hen pheasant, as a hatcher of eggs, at the best of times cannot be compared to the hen partridge. The latter seldom fails to hatch every one of her eggs that has any hatch in it. In no case do I remember to have found that a partridge had left unhatched more than an egg or so which contained a chick (probably dead before deserted). When some of a partridge's eggs are hatched considerably in advance of the rest, so that some chicks are ready to have a peep at the world while others yet are struggling to get out of the shell, the cock partridge takes charge of them. The hen pheasant is less fortunate than the hen partridge. She has no attentive husband all to herself: always close at hand, and often by her side, maybe sharing her thoughts of that great day when they shall lead forth a tribe of sprightly chicks to catch flies among the lilies of the fields, hunt for insects lurking among the stems of corn, feast on juicy seeds of grass and weeds, scramble for the plunder of ants' nests, bask in the smile of the sun, or seek shade beneath the soft herbage of summer. Often I have thought of this loneliness of the pheasant hen, and have pitied her as she sat through some sweet day when it is good to wander.

It is no uncommon thing for a pheasant to leave half her eggs unhatched, and go off with what chicks she has, not because the rest of the eggs were unhatchable, but because they did not hatch with the rest. Yet I do not think she means wilfully to desert the chicks struggling within the shell, or possibly hatched, but still wet and unable to run. The cause of the trouble is that the first-hatched chicks by leaving the nest show that they are ready to go, and the mother, in her anxiety for them, leaves too—at the expense of those not ready. I recall the case of a pheasant that was sitting on ten eggs. I did not know when she would be due to hatch, having found her sitting, and counted her eggs when she was off to feed. However, coming her way one afternoon, I was surprised to see her squatting about a foot from her nest, in which were nine eggs and an empty shell. She was brooding a strong chick, and had left the nine eggs, chipped, and each containing a live chick. Another time a pheasant was sitting on her nest, in which were a few eggs still to be hatched and two very newly-hatched chicks, while an inch or two outside the nest were three fine chicks dead and stiff. So a pheasant whose eggs do not hatch out together has to choose one of the two horrible horns of her dilemma. Of course, should the hen decide to give her remaining eggs a chance to hatch, all may go well with the chicks who explore beyond her protection—if the weather is fine.

Brooding or hovering, which mean protection and warmth, are the secret of a chick's life in early days; the warmth of the mother's body, or of warmth equal thereto, is quite as essential as suitable food. Even if she hatches all her eggs, it is unreasonable to expect a pheasant to rear a large brood except during a spell of warm days and nights, when the chicks are comparatively independent of the warmth supplied by their mother. It is well known how important is a regular temperature in the artificial hatching of eggs. The rational inference is that it is equally important in the hatching of eggs by birds in a wild state. One knows also that eggs must be turned during incubation. So when the weather is unseasonably cold, especially during the night (which is always cold enough), not only do some of the eggs in a nest become ruined by being chilled, but, owing to the change of position in the nest, most of the clutch may be spoiled, or their embryos so weakened that either they do not hatch at all or produce useless chicks.

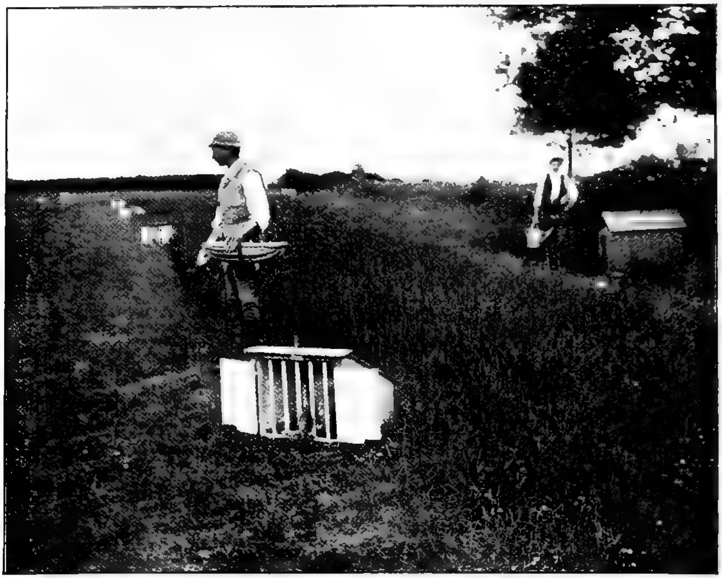
After a breeding season which has not appeared to be over-cold or over-wet, one may be disappointed at the supply of pheasants when shooting begins. There may have been a good hatch, and plenty of fine, newly-hatched broods may have been seen about. All may be well while the chicks still are small enough to allow the whole brood to find accommodation beneath their mother, and so warmth. But when the fast-growing chicks become so large that some must remain in the cold, a continual scrambling goes on for the inside berths. And so it ends by the rearing to maturity of no more birds than if the brood originally had been half as big. If all hen pheasants left for stock could be relied upon to rear half a dozen chicks each, there would be no need for hand-rearing—at least, where there were no foxes. And still less, if pheasants could be induced to pair, and manage their affairs like partridges.

The hen pheasant, while somewhat lacking in the common-sense of the partridge, does not deserve her proverbial reputation for being a bad mother. The chief charge against her is that she delights to kill off her chicks by dragging them through all the wet grass she can find ; it is rather the chicks themselves that run into danger by foraging ahead of their mother, who, as a rule, does not lead, but follows, her brood. She scarcely can be expected to do more than is in her power. And what is in her power she does. I believe that the cause of the liability of pheasants' eggs, sat upon by their owners, not to hatch together is slight chilling. This means that, though the eggs may have been sat upon the full time, they have not been sat upon the full time at the full temperature. The frequency with which several pheasant eggs remain in the nest unhatched after the brood has run—in such striking contrast to the occasional waste egg or two in the nests of partridges—is not because the eggs contained unfertilized germs, or were fatally chilled during hatching, but were spoiled before being sat upon at all. This is proved, I think, by the fact that, of eggs laid in genial weather, and waiting to be sat upon in genial weather, comparatively few are found to be addled, whatever the proportion left unhatched in the nest.

Pheasants seldom cover their eggs while the clutch is being completed, and then but slightly. Partridges, on the other hand, not only cover their eggs almost invariably, but with a considerable thickness of material, and most carefully. Consequently their eggs, before being sat upon, never suffer perceptibly from frost.

Though the stock of pheasants left to hatch and rear their own young be large, and the breeding season good, the results, following the giving up of hand-rearing, are sure to be disappointing at first. It is probable that the larger the stock, the poorer, in proportion, will be the result of the first season. At the best of times pheasants are apt to be slovenly in choosing nesting-sites, and to lay in each other's nests. These failings are particularly noticeable in hens bred from a stock of birds hand-reared for generations, and themselves hand-reared and pampered in endless ways. Most of us have heard the story of the keeper in whose accounts appeared an item for brandy, his explanation being that it was to mix with his birds' food—when the cold wanted keeping out. I think it best, when giving up rearing, only to leave a moderate stock, and then not to shoot any hens for a season. I have proved that not till several generations after pheasants have been left to breed in a wild state do they regain the full measure of their natural shrewdness in taking care of them-

A PHEASANT USURPS A THRUSH'S NEST BUILT ON THE GROUND.



THE REARING-FIELD.

selves and their belongings. The longer your stock has been wild-bred, the more satisfactory the results.

The hand-rearing of pheasants is a special department of a keeper's duties, but it by no means follows that a successful rearer is a successful all-round keeper. A man may be a fine loader of cartridges, yet may be unable to hit a hay-stack. The rearing of pheasants has its charms and its worries, of great interest to the keeper, but not to other people—even to the employer, who is apt to confine his practical interest to the cost. Hand-rearing is so tainted and controlled by money that there is not much room left now for woodcraft, the essence of a gamekeeper's life. Hand-reared pheasants are quoted at so much a head, or a hundred, or a thousand, the price being a little higher or a little lower in a bad or a good season. This reminds one of the sale of music at so much a perforated roll.

The rearing of pheasants is the drudgery of a keeper's work. From early morning till late at night the keeper is tied to his rearing-field hand and foot. It is the same old routine day after day, night after night. But however sick of things he may grow as the weeks go by, I never yet knew a keeper who was not as pleased with the first new brood of chicks as a mother with her latest baby, even though he may have reared hundreds for years and years. See with what care he chooses a spot for their cradling in a coop lime-washed within to virgin whiteness; how tenderly he handles each fluffy morsel! Then how careful he is to see that each chick is safely brooded beneath the hen before he fastens the shutter and leaves the coop! Again and again he will return and kneel down to peep within, lest a chick may have wandered from the life-giving warmth. With what care he will mince the hard-boiled egg for their first feed! and how proudly he draws your attention to their sturdiness by saying, 'And don't they nip about!'

There are long hours with plenty of hard work attached to pheasant-rearing, and there is a good deal of luck. I never had better luck than I did with the first batch of pheasants I ever reared entirely by myself. I put out a hundred and seventy chicks in ten coops, in two rows, and never had a moment's worry with them. I was able to take to covert a hundred and sixty-four birds. I never did better. The second batch, soon after they were hatched, came in for some days of icy cold wind, which, besides nearly blowing them bodily away when they ventured outside the coops, withered them up. Then, when the weather had improved, and the survivors were going on nicely, blindness made its appearance. Only a few birds died from it, but of the afflicted which recovered, several never did any good first failing to get their head-feathers (a process which keepers always are glad to see completed), and finally suffering severely when gapes broke out in covert.

By blindness I mean that the eyelids, first of one eye and soon afterwards of both, are stuck together by a gummy substance, when, unless something is done, the afflicted chicks soon starve. A certain cure is just to tinge a morsel of hard-boiled white of egg with blue vitriol (sulphate of copper), and put it down the sufferer's throat. You must not be too liberal with the vitriol, or you will save the chick all further liability to ailments of any sort. By way of external treatment, the eyelids may be anointed with oil of almonds, and separated so that the bird can see to feed; which external treatment should be continued, if necessary, till the internal dose has taken effect. I knew one keeper who swore by his own saliva as a fomentation for the eyelids of blind pheasants. But individual treatment is tedious—not that the keeper begrudges any amount of trouble, if thereby he can rear a pheasant to maturity. Unfortunately, as I have often proved, birds, though completely cured of blindness, are very liable to die off later, especially from gapes. Chopped onions are particularly beneficial to birds suffering from gapes, and it is a good plan also to dress their food, immediately before giving, with a mixture in the proportion of sixpenny-worth of chloroform to two shillings' worth of best linseed oil. Of course, there is no cure for the broken-leg stage of cramp, but I have proved that the following treatment, if used when the first signs of lameness appear, will check an outbreak of cramp: Boil Cayenne pepper with rice—about enough of the pepper to allow a grain of it to a grain of rice. Give a liberal allowance of rice so treated for a few feeds. It is curious to note that the sprinkling of raw Cayenne on the bird's food does not do any good. It is something in the boiling that works the charm.

Some people who had taken a shoot next to the one I was on came down one July day to inspect their hand-reared pheasants. All had gone well, and the keeper looked forward with genuine pleasure to showing them his birds. The 'gents,' however, did not say much beyond 'Yes-yes' and 'Just so' in answer to the keeper's hints for some appreciative expression. Nor did the keeper understand the reason till he heard one of the 'gents' say to another that he thought the birds were 'nice and numerous, but that their tails were absurdly short for pheasants.'

If there is any other game to be considered, it is most unsatisfactory for a keeper to be ordered to rear fewer birds than he can manage conveniently. A few birds are just as much a tie to him as many; he has 'got to be there' just the same. Probably the employer's point of view—apart from the expense of more birds—is that the rearing of only a couple of hundred or so will allow the keeper ample time to look after the rest of the game on his beat. This is all very fine in theory. But the fewer his birds, the less the keeper can afford to lose any from preventable causes, which are sure to occur if he rushes round the coops, throws down the food, and tears off to get to where his presence may be useful by about the time when he must turn back for another feed. In the intervals between feeds the birds are left to the mercy of chance. It is better not to rear birds at all if the keeper cannot give them his best attention.

Most people who have had anything to do with the hatching of eggs, especially game eggs, know that eggs containing live chicks sometimes will refuse to hatch in circumstances which are giving the best results with other eggs of the same sort. The shell in pieces peels off the membrane, which shrivels and holds the chicks a fast prisoner. The cause of the trouble usually is put down to the dryness of the shells. This is so to a certain extent, but not, I believe, in the way most people suppose. Seldom, if ever, are peeled eggs seen in the nest of a partridge or pheasant, or among game eggs that have been sat upon from first to last by fowls. But they often are seen in clutches of game eggs which have been cut out of grass, and have been handed over to a fowl for the completion of incubation. It is said that the nests of partridges and pheasants, because they are on the ground, and almost in actual contact with the soil, insure a proper supply of moisture to the eggs. And yet there is the same perfect hatching of the eggs of French partridges at the top of the driest pile of straw as on the ground, and of those of the wild-duck aloft in the pollarded willow, and even of the pheasant that occasionally will nest in an ivy-clad tree or on the top of a stump. And the thick-shelled eggs of hawks on a dry nest of twigs, hatch well enough, and so do wood-pigeons'. The same organic changes must take place in the tissues of all eggs that hatch out, irrespective of sort or situation.

In view of this, and of other facts which I have observed, the peeling of eggs at hatching-time scarcely can be due to the lack of external moisture. I believe peeling is caused by a too prolonged absence from the eggs, during the intermediate period of incubation, of the temperature necessary to hatch them, yet not quite long enough to destroy the life of the chicks. In short, a special weakness of the chicks is the cause of their not breaking the shell in the usual way in the first place; while, in the second, the actual peeling of the shells is due to the abnormally long attempt to hatch them made by domestic sitters. Look into the state of things from the imprisoned chick's point of view. Escape from the egg is due solely to the exertions of the chick—the weaker it is, the less strength it has to make the necessary exertions. But the drier and more brittle the outside wall of shell is—rather than moist and tough—the easier it is to break; and, conversely, the drier the inside membranous bag which encloses the chick, the tougher it becomes, and the harder to burst or tear. A chick is ready to escape from the shell directly the process of absorbing the yolk is completed. If it does not escape in due time, while the membrane is moist and easily rent, what happens? Why, owing to the admission of air through the 'chip-hole,' the membrane dries, toughens, and shrivels about the chick, which perishes, and the shell, which cannot shrink, peels off in pieces. Thus we have, I think, the true explanation of that trouble for which many of us have hoped there was a remedy other than prevention.

CHAPTER VIII

PHEASANTS: IN WAR

To the keeper a pheasant is a pheasant—Wild *v.* hand-reared for shooting—Craftiness of wild birds—Little and big coverts—A keeper's dodge—My first pheasant shoot—Bad guns make bad birds—A beater's comment—Woods alter—Fog.

PROVIDED it is a good one, I do not care a rap whether a pheasant is hand-reared or wild when I am shooting at it; and the better it is, the less I care. Who shall say of any pheasant whether it was in bondage bred or free? Certainly not the men who most often express an opinion on the antecedents of birds they have missed; neither can the keeper do better than guess. To him a pheasant is a pheasant in the shooting season, and so long as it puts in an appearance when shooting is going on, he does not care how or whence it came. However, he is always positive that every pheasant seen near the boundary is one of his tame birds.

Wild pheasants are better than hand-reared birds for keeping up the stock for breeding. When you shoot through a wood at the end of the season and see a hundred hens—if they are wild ones, you may reckon on a good many more unseen. But if you see a hundred hand-reared birds, probably you see all that there are to be seen. This is fortunate, particularly from the keeper's point of view. For when he is expected to produce so many pheasants for the following shooting season, by hand-rearing he can manage it from a much smaller stock than if dependent entirely on the efforts and luck of birds allowed to conduct their own affairs. And wild birds are easier to keep at home, though it is uncertain in what part of it you will find them. Provided their home is reasonably attractive compared to the state of things beyond bounds, wild-bred pheasants relieve the keeper from that worrying tendency of hand-reared birds to stray, and to stay where they stray. Wild birds are not nearly so easy to manage, and therefore to show, as so-called tame ones; and so the keeper naturally prefers the latter, since, as is so much the case in these days, the demand is for a concentrated show. I should say that a hundred tame birds are likely to make a better one-day show than half as many again of wild ones.

During a day's shooting the leakage of wild birds is so much greater than that of tame ones, in all the many ways in which pheasants can give one the slip. Assuming that you have cut off the escape of wild birds in every direction, they are by no means as good as put over the guns. When they find that every loophole of escape by their legs is barred, they squat, and do not keep running about in a herd like tame birds, which stop every now and again and look up, as much as to say, 'Here's a state of things! What had we better do?' On come the beaters, and your wild birds have to make up their minds whether they will fly at all, and, if so, whether over the guns or the beaters, or whether they will lie low and chance being passed over. And a wild pheasant that elects to lie low is cunning enough not to budge unless almost trodden upon. And they are dreadful offenders at breaking back. They are wonderfully quick in noting that the sticks and curses of beaters are less offensive than the banging and expressions of disappointment of the men with guns.

It is especially in small coverts that wild birds compare unfavourably with tame ones—which can be driven with a fair amount of certainty from covert to covert, backwards and forwards, more or less how you like; but wild birds, when they can see the guns standing in the open, very much prefer to go back, no matter in what direction you try to drive them. In big woods they give much better results than hand-reared birds, fizzing up through the tree-tops and away at a fine pace, instead of flopping across the rides as tame birds mostly do. Talking of pheasants fizzing up reminds me of a dodge of a keeper whom I often went to help on shooting-days. Two or three of us would be given live pheasants to put in our pockets, and when the guns came out of the house it would be suggested that a clump of very thick high laurels might be worth 'running' through. In we would go till we got to the middle, where there was a shaft-like opening, up which we would start our birds.

The first day's covert-shooting which I managed was a great event. I had a hundred and seventy birds handed over to me when they were fit to go to covert. We carried them on a stretcher—coops, hens, and pheasants, two coops at a time—from the rearing-field to my covert, a good half-mile away. And I was not sorry when that part of the job was over. How proud I was of those birds! and what a show they made in the long days of their innocence when I 'fed' along the broad ride! As they grew older they grew shier. When the time of shooting drew near, though I knew by various signs that my birds were about the covert, I would have given a good deal for a sight of them all together. For about a month before shooting-time it is usual for keepers to complain that their birds must be straying away, because they do not see them at the feeding-places, and the food is not cleared up. The reason is that there is an abundance of natural food, which the birds prefer to that provided by the keeper. Pheasants will leave wheat untouched if they can get plenty of the spangles to be found on the undersides of fallen oak-leaves.

Though, the night before my shoot, I went to bed confident of a good day on the morrow, I did not have a good night. I seemed to be dreaming all the time of shooting my wood. How we beat and beat, and never flushed a pheasant—never so much as saw one running among the underwood, which seemed to be so thin that one could see through it from ride to ride! And then it seemed that I was not beating, but standing as one of the guns at the best beat, according to the plan of beating which I had arranged. Pheasants seemed to be getting up in a continuous stream, but my gun vanished each time I tried to shoot. Breakfast restored my confidence. We had a capital day. The bag was ninety-two pheasants; of course, it *ought* to have been a hundred. Everyone was pleased, myself most of all. I got some tips. But what were they compared to success?

I am one of the many admirers of a tall pheasant. Frequently I have been obliged to prolong my admiration thereof while two little wreaths of smoke have wandered from the muzzle of my gun. Next to having a go at them myself, I enjoy putting good birds over other guns, but I have grown very sick of it when the shooting has been a mere farce. Many a time I have rushed birds over the guns to shorten the annoyance of seeing them missed. Here is a brief but horrible account of a performance at as pretty a rise as ever I organized. All the shooters, only one of whom was worthy to be called a gun, were forward; and all the birds, of which there were over two hundred, went forward except two or three. There was no rushing, the birds going one or two at a time, never more than four. Each one of them was good to see. The result was that the gun who could shoot (and, of course, had least shooting) got nine, and the others (I do not remember what the beaters called them besides shooters, but several things) six between them, the best individual performance being the firing of thirty-eight shots from one gun—not an ejector—for three pheasants. I since have heard of (only, I am glad to say) a man who emptied a hundred and seventy cartridges at one stand, and bagged seven pheasants. However, another gun, who was at the same stand when the beat was taken a second time the same day, pulled down ninety-two by way of atonement. I never could understand what satisfaction some people get out of blazing away all day for nothing. As one of my beaters put it, 'they must have a devilish good cheek to stand there and do it.'

This is how bad shooting affects the keeper—my beautiful rise reduced the bag for the whole wood to nineteen. I had arranged everything with a view to make as many birds as possible available for the full-cream shooting. I suppose

I could have made sure of about a hundred of those pheasants by driving them to and fro over the rides. You seldom find a keeper reluctant to show his birds in a sporting way, if the guns are likely to hit a fair proportion of them. But when guns are known or prove to be consistently bad, can it be wondered at that keepers should give some thought to the bag, by which, unfortunately, tips too often are measured? It is not human for men who, to quote from the language of beaters, have shot 'summat scandalous' or 'rascallion-bad' to be generous.

I often have seen pheasants fail to give sport in circumstances apparently the same as when, on many other occasions, they have come well. Suppose one has a wood which is not only of convenient size to take in one beat right out to the guns in the open, but, so beaten, gives a maximum amount of shooting at birds passably good, if not actually tall—this may be so for several years, while the underwood is fairly short and thick at the bottom. Then there comes a time when the birds will persist in going back, while those that do come forward do not rise far enough away to be good when they reach the guns. Often have I seen this sort of thing, and heard people discussing the puzzle, which generally was put down to the birds' 'cussedness.' (No pheasants will face guns in the open in the teeth of a gale, in any circumstances.) This is what I believe to be the explanation of the cussedness puzzle: So long as the stuff is young, thick at the bottom, and short enough for pheasants to get a view of the advancing beaters over the top of the underwood, the birds go forward readily. Probably you get a prolonged rise, free from any undesirable rush at the finish. When, however, the underwood grows old and tall, it becomes correspondingly thinner at the bottom, but thicker at the top. Naturally the birds find it more convenient to run than to rise through a network of twigs. And so the majority run on, peep out, see the guns, retire, and squat in close formation just within the wood. There they squat, and watch the reception given to any hares and other creatures which venture to make a dash for it. The guns begin to think there can be no birds in the wood. The keeper longs for shooting to relieve the tension of his mind, and to deaden the apparently profitless tapping of the beaters' sticks. He racks his brains to think how, where, and by whom some dreadful mistake has been made; whether the stops have 'played the fool,' come away from their stations prematurely, or goodness knows what. Whatever has happened, he will get the blame. Then suddenly there is a sound of many wings, punctuated by the shouts of excited beaters and the cries of cocks in a mighty hurry—but few shots. The birds come sailing back, streams of them; nothing seems to stem the tide of wings. A few shots, and the beat is finished. All is wrong, and nothing right.

There is no absolute cure for this state of things, but there are several ways of bringing about an improvement. The worst, though it is better than none at all, is to place the guns so near to the wood that the retreating birds are within their reach. Another is to have butts made some time before, of hurdles or lengths of wire-netting, draped with fir-boughs, bracken, or other suitable local material. And then, though the birds may come forward in fair numbers, they are low—most of them too low to be taken in front. Pits could be dug, so that the heads of the guns are below the ground-level—the birds doubtless would come forward well enough, but only about far enough from the ground to allow them to use their wings, and a good many would be content to use their legs. Where expense is no objection, or underwood is of little value, and landlords and others are willing, another plan is this: Cut down and clear a strip right across the covert, about thirty yards wide, and the same from the guns' end of it. Before beating begins, erect netting along the edge of the clearing nearest the guns. Then the birds must rise, and they have a clear start. Not finding enough width of wood to allow them to settle again, they go to the guns decently. But the best way of all to compromise the matter, provided the field in which the guns must stand slopes away from the wood, is to put the guns right back under the opposite wood. Then the birds, when they peep outside, probably are unable to see the guns, and come forward. By the time when they catch sight of the guns they are so well under way, and so near the second wood, that they continue onwards, merely rising higher and higher—the very thing required of them.

Fog is not pleasant at any time, but it is a nuisance on shooting-days—unless your object is wood-pigeons. Partridge-driving in a thick fog is not only too dangerous, but impossible; while anything beyond a veil of fog takes all the polish off a day's covert-shooting. Yet there are circumstances connected with pheasant-shooting in which a moderate density of fog will permit sporting shooting probably quite out of the question in clear weather. Suppose one has been beating a big covert all day, in clear weather, towards the final corner—as a rule, it is almost useless to try to force birds from their home across the open at any time of the day. Much more so is it useless to try late in the day, when the birds are thinking about going to roost. So the last corner, crowded with birds, has to be brought back over a ride. Now is the time when a fog of fair density comes to the rescue. Instead of making your last corner into a slaughter-house, you may place the guns in the open, and your pheasants will go to them as if they liked it.

Pheasant-shooting on a foggy day makes it harder to put the birds up, and even if you employ double the usual number of stops, a lot of birds will give you the slip. Besides, the birds that have passed over the guns may soar so high in a fog as to pass right over another covert, into which, in clear weather, they would have gone most conveniently. Happy is the keeper whose lot is cast in a country where there are no fogs, but plenty of pheasants, which it is more difficult to show low enough than high enough.

CHAPTER IX

HARES AND RABBITS

Hares more satisfactory than rabbits—Keep your hares quiet—Hares and hounds—Hare disease—Damage by hares—Rabbits, rats, and roots—How rabbits use their teeth—Hares and holes—Shooting hares—Rabbit-shooters—Warm work.

I WAS so fortunate as to have a sprinkling of hares on all the land over which I was keeper. And as I was obliged to keep down rabbits—if possible, to the point of extinction—I saw no reason why I should not compromise matters by getting up the hares. A bag of twenty hares was considered very good for one day. We got twenty at my first covert shoot. Then the bag rose to forty (which was equal to the known record for the wood), and after another year or so to fifty. The most we ever got was sixty-four; and that was in two-thirds of the wood, when the rest was cut down and bare. Though the largest, it was the worst hare covert I had. It is fair to the covert to say that not a yard of netting was used when the sixty-four hares were killed, and that they were obtained incidentally with eighty-two wild pheasants. I suppose that, with the aid of netting, we should have bagged well over a hundred hares; for the guns that day, by way of a very welcome change, were all useful. I had one little wood—only thirty-nine acres—and in the first beat of it—less than fifteen acres—I am certain good guns could have bagged a hundred hares the first time through.

A sprinkling of hares is a great help to a day's covert-shooting. There was never a dull moment in my woods on shooting-days; always there were hares on the move, even before the beaters started. By the time the pheasant stage of a beat had arrived most of the hares had run the gauntlet (I remember one hare that jumped clean over a beater who tried to stop it from breaking back). Where pheasants are the only game, there is a great deal of dulness, punctuated occasionally by a burst of furious firing. Rabbits do not improve matters much, since they come mostly when it is all hands to the pheasants. And with hares there is no bother about stopping them out, with the consequent disturbance of coverts. All that is necessary is to keep them quiet. Once it was suggested to me, when my coverts were to be shot the second time, that I should beat them chiefly for hares, as there were not many pheasants to spare. I said I had intended to do so had there been any hares in them. I was informed that there were any amount of hares in them, because they had been seen a few days before, when the hounds were there. I said that was the very reason why they were not there now. But it was not much fun proving to the hilt how hares hate hounds.

I do not think that the typhous disease from which hares suffer is caused by overcrowding, since it occurs where hares are numerous or few. Feeding on frosted clover I am certain has a great deal to do with the disease. The worst outbreak I ever had was after a very wet, mild autumn, when there came a sudden frost. The clover was very rank and sappy. That winter I found the dead bodies of sixty odd hares on a thirty-five-acre field of clover.

Every year, so soon as the hares' runs on the clover turned black (owing to the frosted leaves being bruised by the hares' feet), we began to find dead and ailing hares. The smaller the hare, the sooner it succumbed. The hares which lived in my woods, near which there was no clover, scarcely suffered at all from the disease. It is a mistake to suppose that hares go miles for food if they are well provided near home. I had a stack of barley-rakings to about every fifteen acres of covert, and it was no uncommon sight at any hour of the day to see half a dozen hares feeding at one stack. Give hares a quiet wood containing plenty of underwood stumps for shelter, some barley-stacks to feed at, and an adjoining field of old sainfoin, and nine out of ten will be content to stay at home all through the winter.

It is obvious that one hare eats as much food as one rabbit. Yet if there are twenty hares and twenty rabbits living on the same farm, the rabbits soon may bring upon their heads the wrath of man, while the hares, though they eat probably a greater quantity of food—that is, do more damage—provoke no murmur of complaint. So it seems logical that if rabbits, even in small numbers, are injurious to the welfare of woods and farming interests, the same quantity of hares must inflict at least an equal amount of damage. But this is not so in fact. Rabbits prefer to feed as close as possible to their lodgings, and make a clean sweep as they go, clearing a crop before them, as do sheep in a fold. Hares, on the other hand, move about, and take a nibble here and there, and unless they are very numerous, the only material damage they do is to clear a few roads through the corn in summer, and to gnaw a few roots in winter. In the latter case, they are so considerate as to stick to a root till finished, instead of chipping fresh ones, and so causing them to rot.

Fortunately, those who preside over farming interests, whether tenant-farmers or bailiffs, are not given to expressing concern for what their eyes do not see; and even if a farmer does complain that hares are nibbling his wheat in spring, when it is beginning to grow luxuriantly, one always can ask in what way that does harm. While he is trying to think of a convincing answer, remind him of the time when farmers gloried in their wheat, and did everything for the good of the great crops they grew, not only sowing it in clean land and hoeing it, but folding sheep over it in the spring, to eat the green tops and tread the roots firmly in the soil. Now, considering that a hare at its worst does no more than eat about half the length of each green blade of wheat which it selects, the result, far from being damaging, must tend to improvement. I won a great victory over a lord high bailiff of an estate, on which I began to get up the stock of hares. He had several fields of wheat which promised very fairly. But so soon as the ears grew heavy with corn, just before ripening, about one in three of the stems fell down. This I observed. The bailiff met me; he was genuinely furious, and told me that he had got judgment against the hares. I thought this was all very fine, and tried to reason with the man, but he would not. So I determined to play him at his own game. I appealed to Cæsar, and found things as the bailiff had told me. I pointed out that the hares certainly had made a few roads through the wheat, but that even the bailiff had made no complaint as to what they had eaten. And was it possible, I asked, for anyone who thought for one moment to believe that hares could knock down one stem in three, evenly, all over several fields? and suggested that the true cause was want of firmness of ground—the essence of wheat's prosperity. There were no more complaints about hares.

I had only one other skirmish with this bailiff—quite a friendly one between ourselves. There was an isolated field of kale and swedes half a mile from the nearest wood. In this wood the bailiff himself admitted there were no rabbits, but he would have it that there were 'a tidy few' in the root-field. I knew that I had failed the previous afternoon to find a couple in the whole field. Partly out of curiosity, and partly to avoid a possible court-martial, I asked the bailiff what evidence he had to prove there were 'a tidy few' rabbits. He could see, he declared, where they had gnawed the swedes. Whereupon I inquired if he knew whether there was any difference between the gnawing of rabbits and the gnawing of rats, and, if so, what it was. He could not say that he did. So I took the trouble to show him. A rat chisels even-sized pieces off roots, eats the flesh, and leaves the rind. A rabbit gnaws away at a root, and eats the rind and flesh as it comes. I took this opportunity to repeat a suggestion that some rat-infested stacks should be threshed.

A keeper never must consent to be lorded over by a bailiff. Bailiffs are inclined to be unwarrantably dictatorial, possibly because, like the centurion of old, they have many men under them. However, I managed, after sticking to my guns, to work with several bailiffs in peace and quietness and pleasure. Here is a story of how a keeper of many rabbits got the better of a bailiff. The bailiff, whose sheep were many but turnips few, had lodged a complaint with the employer. The keeper found out the day appointed for inspecting the turnips. Snow lay on the ground, and there were rabbits' tracks near every turnip. So the keeper went stealthily the night before, after the shepherd had gone home, and let out the sheep. The bailiff's case not only fell to the ground, but he was admonished to see that in the future the sheep were better secured.

It is a common habit of those who manage farms, when the sowing of corn or roots is going on, to neglect the tillage of a headland adjoining a wood, and after the crop has struggled up thinly to use that part as a road. They then attribute the comparative failure of the crop in that part of the field to rabbits, which, likely enough, do not exist. In my greener days a farmer tried to make out that the two or three rabbits in my wood had cleared a field of wheat. I told him he knew there never had been a decent plant of wheat, which, as luck would have it, was much thicker along the edge of the wood than anywhere else. This, I suggested, seemed to prove that rabbit fertilizer was better than none at all.

Rabbit-snarers often will complain that someone steals their rabbits because the string securing the snare to the peg apparently has been cut. I do not say people will not take rabbits, and sometimes the snares in which they are caught as well. But a rabbit can cut a string with its teeth as cleanly as a man can do it with a knife. Once when I was ferreting in a dell a rabbit came up to a net, nipped a mesh, and hopped through the aperture, within a yard of my face. Occasionally I have had a fine dig when a rabbit has cut the line on a ferret. One rabbit cut a new line three times, as fast as I sent in a fresh ferret. Curiously enough, this happened in the same burrow of the dell where the rabbit had nipped the mesh of the net and escaped. We always suspected the same rabbit of all the cutting.

Once or twice I have trapped hares at the mouth of a rabbit-hole, to which I concluded they must have gone in search of a sheltered seat. I know of one instance only in which a hare has gone right down a rabbit's burrow. I was with a shooting-party walking some sainfoin for partridges, when a leveret about two-thirds grown jumped up, and offered a gun an easy crossing shot; but as the range was not more than twenty yards, there was no hurry. However, just as the trigger was pulled the hare disappeared as if swallowed by the earth, and was seen no more. It had taken a rabbit-run which led it in the nick of time to safety.

There is a saying that any fool can hit a hare. But it is better not to be able to hit hares at all than always to hit them in their hinder parts. I knew a keeper who could shoot rabbits cleanly one after the other in any circumstances, yet he was useless at hares, which he seldom failed to miss altogether. On hares there is more preventable suffering inflicted by the thoughtless and the unskilled than on any other game—if only for this reason, it is a good thing that hares in many parts are extinct. Surely, if a man can manage to hit a partridge occasionally, he can remember, when shooting at a hare, that its head and neck represent an area equal to that of a partridge. If he cannot, his intellect must be so weak that he ought not to be allowed to shoot at all, unless by way of suicidal practice. Once I was feeling so disgusted with a shooter for persisting in blazing at hares out of reasonable range that when he said to me, 'Did I hit that hare?' I asked, 'Why did you shoot?'

More than one dog has been shot instead of the object which it was pursuing. A party of guns were shooting in a wood. As the underwood was thick, and the beaters were few and game was scarce, the host sent a favourite Irish terrier to enliven the proceedings. There was a double shot. One of the party took an early opportunity to inform the host that the gentleman on his left had fired the first barrel at a hare and the second at the terrier, but apparently without damaging either. The host explained that he did not object to that particular gunner shooting at his dog, so long as he aimed at it, adding: 'It is only when he is aiming at other things that my dog is in danger.'

It happened at a covert shoot at which I was present that two of the guns were posted in a field on the flank of a beat, while the rest of the party were out of sight round the corner. A hare broke out between the two flank guns, to be clean missed with both barrels by one of them, who, after the beat was over, jeered at the forward guns for stopping so few pheasants. 'But,' asked one, 'what was that double shot on your side?' He was told that a hare was the cause. 'Then you missed it?' 'No; it ran between us, and I fired off merely to call the other fellow's attention to it,' came the ingenious excuse.

I remember a huntsman who went in for shooting as well as the pursuit of the fox. He frequently figured at local rabbit shoots, though he was invited chiefly from motives of courtesy and diplomacy, for he never helped the bag. However, he had a stock method of enticing attention from his atrocious aiming. Following his every shot you would hear, in tones unwarrantably cheerful: 'Gone awa-ay.' ''It 'ard.' 'Look out; comin' down to you, sir!'

I have had a lot of fun, not necessarily at the expense of rabbits, but of the people associated with me in their pursuit. If you would meet people shooting without a licence in their pocket, go to a rabbit shoot. There is a story of a nobleman who, with his two unlicensed sons, was trying to shoot rabbits, when the local constable put in an appearance. The keeper intimated the constable's arrival to his master (who, besides being a nobleman, was a magistrate). The nobleman said : 'Oh—er—give the man a couple of rabbits, and tell him to go.' 'Very good, m'lord,' the keeper answered, 'but we ain't shot none.'

A would-be shooter of rabbits was complaining to me that a rabbit he had killed, dead, had not been picked up. Naturally my sympathy was aroused, and I asked for details before making inquiry among the beaters. 'He came tearing along at forty miles an hour,' the shooter explained, 'and I let him have it at about eight yards and a half. And I'm sure he's dead, because I shot his front foot right off.' I told him I hoped we should find the rabbit, and perhaps its front foot. Another man gave me two incidents on the same day. I heard afterwards that he was a commercial traveller. At any rate, he wore a navy blue Chesterfield top-coat (with a lovely velvet collar) and a bowler, and his weapon appeared to be of the presentation type. I found myself posted in a ride on this man's right. Apart from his general appearance, my attention was particularly attracted by the way in which he presented arms, so to speak. He poised his piece as one would a dart, so that the butt-end of the stock just cleared his right ear. I thought what a nice tap he would get under the ear if the gun were to go off. But what astonished me, since I could see no rabbits moving, was that the man remained for a good five minutes in this extraordinary state of presented arms. At last I made so bold as to ask him if he could see a rabbit. He answered cheerfully: 'Not at this moment, but I saw one quite recently.' In return for this information I gave him a hint on the risk run by his right ear. Curiously enough, the man turned out to be quite harmless, not only to rabbits, but to human beings. After lunch he and I were walking among some dead bracken on either side of a broad grass cart-track. A rabbit was put up, and came at full speed past my colleague at a range of about thirty yards—a pretty broadside shot over the green cart-track. Two shots were fired almost as one, and the rabbit turned a summersault on the turf. My colleague waved his bowler aloft, saying: 'Ah, I knew I'd got that beggar—had a fair line on 'im.' I let him revel in the bliss of ignorance.

I came very near shooting a fellow gun at one of these rabbit shoots. I was standing in a flank ride, after the beaters, interspersed with guns, had passed me. They were about sixty yards ahead, when shortly after a chorus of 'Rabbit back!' I saw a rabbit coming just right for me. It would have been perfectly safe to have shot so soon as the rabbit was near enough, but, being in a strange wood, I decided to be doubly on the safe side; so I did not fire till I could do so in a direction opposite to that of the beaters. Imagine my horror on going to fetch the rabbit, which lay at the foot of a tree, when from behind the tree came a hand, and a voice saying: 'All right, I'll pick 'e up.' One of the guns had dropped out of the beating line, and had sat down behind the tree without saying a word. I took good care to shoot at no more rabbits that day in line with a tree.

Not knowing what was in store, I went to a rabbit-shoot, which proved to be for keepers and tenants and their friends and acquaintance generally. I saw the head-keeper at the start, but afterwards could not make out where he had got to till just before lunch. After a beat or two I became so alarmed that I retired from all active part in the fray, and spent the time in taking cover. Some of the guns thought nothing of blazing at a rabbit running between each other's legs. A last I found myself at the far end of the wood, where I was delighted to find the head-keeper, sitting on a stump, smoking peacefully. He was not surprised at my adventures, and explained that he had told the guns 'they was welcome to kill all the rabbits, but if they wanted to shoot anything else they must shoot theirselves.'

Apart from other considerations, too many rabbits are not good for game; but it would be a sorry prospect for keepers, game, and foxes if rabbits were exterminated, for they are the buffers of peace in the community of the woods.

CHAPTER X

WOOD-PIGEONS AND WILD-FOWL

The difficulty, uncertainty, and charm of pigeon-shooting—Novel pigeon-shooting—Value of first innings—Best time—Hints—Habits of pigeons—A pigeon and a stone—Turtle-doves—A warm corner—Pigeons at ponds—Food of pigeons—Pigeon diphtheria—A slice of luck—Winter work.

WOOD-PIGEONS are the wild-fowl of waterless districts. I have had my share of sport with wood-pigeons if I never have any more; also I have missed my share of pigeons. The man who can hit wood-pigeons can hit anything that flies. Not every man has killed a brace from a covey of driven partridges so that both birds have fallen to the ground in front of him—to accomplish the feat at the expense of wood-pigeons coming straight is not so simple as it seems. I never did it with partridges, but managed it with wood-pigeons once, and once only. I came within an ace of doing it a second time during the last days in my keeper's berth, but the second bird fell, as it were, 'on the line.' However, to score a double, at wood-pigeons, brings, in my experience of shooting, as much satisfaction as anything, no matter how or where the birds fall. There is nothing like wood-pigeon shooting for teaching a man how to take birds coming to him, and the habit of aiming well forward, which is the keynote of good work.

There is no prospect of wood-pigeon shooting becoming a fashionable sport, if only because of its uncertainty. Yet uncertainty in any sport is half its attraction. You may go out to shoot pigeons on a dozen days; on many of them you may not get a shot, and you will be lucky to make one double-figure bag. Yet you never know when you are going to be let in for a real good innings, so it is a golden rule always to take plenty of cartridges. I have lost several chances to do great things through shortage of cartridges. The best of pigeon-shooting is that it lasts almost the year round, and that without bringing about even a desirable decrease in the numbers of the birds. Naturally one shrinks from killing wood-pigeons during the height of their breeding-time, which is from the middle of May till the middle of July. By the latter date many young birds will have joined the crowds of pigeons that invade fields of ripening corn. Rye, winter oats, and winter barley are the first grains to ripen; but so soon as the ears of wheat begin to assume a bronze shade, though still far from ripe, pigeons will come to wheat in preference to all else. They might prefer ripe peas and vetches, but these are not available till much later on, and, curiously enough, pigeons do not care for them till decidedly ripe.

The most curious pigeon-shooting that ever fell to my lot was more like walking up partridges. I discovered it quite by accident. I had occasion to cut across a huge open field, and walked along a furrow through some clover. I had not gone far when up got a pigeon, and a little farther on another, and so on, till I found myself with six pigeons in my pocket. The pigeons had discovered some self-sown barley among the clover, which was neither thick nor high. I must have bagged the six while walking not more than three hundred yards straight up the furrow. The hearing of wood-pigeons is much less keen than most people suppose—infinitely inferior to that of partridges and pheasants—but I never have met with pigeons harder of hearing than were these. It seemed incredible that the first shot I fired should not have put up every pigeon in the field. I had not time, neither did I want any more pigeons, nor had I many more cartridges, nor perhaps would the farmer have appreciated it; but to have walked the whole of that clover-field must have resulted in a good bag. I came that way next day, but saw no more pigeons.

The secret of getting the cream of pigeon-shooting when the birds come to the colouring wheat is to have first innings at each field. They will not come to a field with the same gluttonous abandon after a taste of its wheat mingled with lead; and if you can manage to get first innings at the first wheat-field to which pigeons take a fancy, you may obtain sport which neither yourself nor the pigeons will forget for some time. So it is well, towards the middle of July, to keep a look-out; but do not disturb the first few pigeons that visit a field: wait till they come in streams. Sometimes pigeons are so keen on the milky wheat (which they guzzle, husk and all) that plenty of shooting may be had at any time during daylight; and it is well worth while, more especially when having a first go at them, to be on the spot from daylight to dusk. I have found, however, that the favourite time for pigeons to feed in summer is the hour on each side of six in the evening. They come then in smaller bunches, with greater frequency, and straighter and lower, than during any other part of the day. Then, too, there is apt to be a strong breeze, which, if it happens to be against the pigeons as they steer for their supper, will help the bag by keeping them low.

I have had many an hour after tea in the summer at supper-seeking pigeons, returning with as big a bag as I could conveniently carry. I never had time to put in a whole day, or I am sure that on several occasions I could have got over a hundred birds to my own gun, without using decoys of any sort. It is advisable always to take some sort of fly-proof receptacle for the dead birds, as otherwise

Fixing decoys on a high hedge.

Placing decoys on wheat shocks.

Straight and high over-head.

Shooting from the middle of a low hedge.

they so soon become fly-blown; and to take also advantage of each lull in the shooting to gather the fallen, for the same reason. I remember a farmer and a friend he took with him bagging a hundred and six pigeons in two hours, but all of them were shot while perched in an ash-tree at a range of about twenty-five yards. There was a single ash-tree in the hedge at each end of a large field of rye, which was considerably forwarder than any other corn in the district.

One often may get very fair shooting which results in all the birds falling into standing corn. Even if the farmer does not object to his corn being trampled down to search for them, you will be lucky to find half the pigeons you get down. The only thing is to refrain from trying to score a right and left, and go straight for each bird as it falls. Rather than leave birds to rot, it is better to take up a position less favourable. Sometimes, by sticking up sheets of newspaper, you may turn birds from their way to yours. The following are what I have found to be ideal conditions for shooting wheat-eating wood-pigeons—a large favourite wood, at least a quarter of a mile from their feeding-field, with bare rising ground intervening, over which you can see approaching pigeons as specks against the skyline. It is good to watch these specks, and to wonder whether they will keep to their course and enter the field out of shot from your stand; or, flying wide, will make a final tack, to bring them swooping diagonally over your head, their purple breasts and white-barred wings vivid in the glow of the evening sun.

A field with woods all round is not so good, although more pigeons may come, because they come from all directions. Owing to the difficulty of keeping out of sight and seeing the birds in time, one does not get such satisfactory shooting as when one can watch the birds converging from a favourite direction, and can enjoy at least the chance to drop nine out of ten on corn-free ground. If there be no fence on that side of the feeding-field nearest the wood from which the pigeons come, you must erect a circular screen of hurdles or netting, well draped with local herbage and boughs—not withered, but fresh; but often there will be a convenient hedge, in the middle of which, if low enough, you can get, or behind it, erecting a screen at your back. Should he hedge be so high as to prevent your seeing approaching birds, fix up a screen on the front side. The great thing is, while giving yourself every chance to see the pigeons in time to take them in front, not to allow them—before or after being shot at—to see more than is necessary of you. Pigeons are scared far more by the sight of a man than by the sound of a dozen shots. Generally, and particularly when they are flying against a breeze, they have a favourite line by which they enter a field.

A tall, isolated tree near the feeding-field (preferably a silver-fir, through which you can see to shoot) is likely to concentrate the birds, which from about eleven in the morning till five in the afternoon are in no hurry to eat. Having done well at them coming to and going from such a tree or group of trees, without special attraction, you may get a good second innings if you fix a decoy or two high up, by climbing the tree or using jointed rods. A day or two's peace in between times will do much to restore the pigeons' confidence. This sort of pigeon-shooting does not last more than about a fortnight, since so many fields will have become attractive. Still, you may bag a good many pigeons, and help to lessen the damage they do to the uncut corn, especially where it is down or 'lodged,' by walking round the edges of the fields or up a furrow. The first shot you fire will put up pigeons in other parts of the field, but the chances are, if they do not notice you, they will settle again. By squatting down below the level of the corn after each shot, you may get others from each field round which you walk. Once I bagged a flying pigeon with a stone. It was a sort of double fluke, for until I had thrown the stone I did not see the pigeon. I had seen some rooks pitch where some rye had lodged, within a few yards of a low hedge. I crept quietly round, armed with the only stone I could find—one of those small light ones, like half a walnut-shell, that refuse to be thrown straight. I reached my point without disturbing the rooks, and tried to throw my wretched stone at a venture at the spot where I knew the rooks must be pretty thick; but just as the stone left my hand a pigeon rose. The stone made a boomerang-like curve, and caught the pigeon just where the upper part of its bill joined its head—as it were, on the bridge of its nose. The effect lasted just long enough to enable me to secure the pigeon. The rooks meanwhile spluttered off, evidently as much surprised to see me as I was to see the pigeon.

With the wood-pigeons large numbers of turtle-doves will resort to fields of ripening wheat, and therefore are credited with eating the wheat. That the doves feed on the wheat may be the rational inference, but it is not the true explanation of their presence. Shoot some doves that rise from such a field, open their crops, and you will see that they are crammed with the ripening seeds of charlock. However many pigeons patronize a field of wheat, if there is no charlock in it there will not be any gathering of doves. Later on, when wheat is ripe and lying wasted on the ground, doves may eat a few grains; but it is my opinion that they are nearly as good friends to the farmer as peewits, which know not the taste of corn. Since pigeons are so fond of the charlock buds, it seems strange that you seldom find a charlock seed in a pigeon's crop while there is wheat to be had. On the other hand, the turtle-doves, close relations of pigeons, may be seen feeding soon after they arrive on charlock seeds, where a rick has been threshed, in preference to a wealth of wasted corn.

I have had good pigeon-shooting in favoured fields of wheat after it has been cut and shocked, also near patches of vetches and peas; but at harvest-time there is such a wealth of food almost everywhere that it is seldom easy to discover a good place to stand. I found one rather too exciting exception. I was waiting at the corner of a wood next to a field of 'shocked' wheat to which pigeons were doing no good. Owing to frequent rain, there had been an unusual delay in getting in the harvest, and this wheat had become soft and sweet, as corn about to grow out does—this doubtless was why the pigeons had a special liking for it. There was a strong north-west wind blowing from the wood, and I had noticed that the pigeons I disturbed from the wheat-shocks tacked their way back to the wood, so that they all entered it within fifty yards or so of the corner. Here I soon made a convenient screen by draping the angle of a wire-netting rabbit fence with some long ash-shoots and bracken. I got an occasional shot, but most of the pigeons preferred to sit in the wood behind me, evidently having fed their fill in view of a coming thunder-storm, whose sullen clouds I could see frowning over the hills behind me. Just as I was congratulating myself on escaping the edge of this storm, a streak of lightning danced round the wire within a few inches of me, followed by a crack-splutter-crack. I thought the lightning had fouled the cartridges in my pocket, when—bang! Such a bang! Fearing a second barrel, I lost no time in putting some yards between myself and my gun and cartridges. Meanwhile I believe every one of the hundreds of pigeons in the wood had dashed out and away with the wind. After a long mad flight, they turned and streamed back to the wood. Every pigeon came within twenty yards of my head. I forgot my fright, recovered my gun, and had the most furious minutes of my life. I fired—well, no matter how many shots, but I pulled down over thirty fat pigeons.

When the corn is ripe and hard and thirst-creating, shooting which need not be despised may be had by waiting within shot of a pond in a quiet spot. You need a comfortable hut, from which you can move out quickly and noiselessly so soon as a pigeon has settled at the pond. It is all the better if the water in the pond is considerably below the level of a sloping bank. Should there be a tree near the pond, most of the pigeons will settle in it before drinking; in which case, if two guns arrange to show themselves simultaneously on either side of the tree, some tricky shooting may be enjoyed. In this way two of my brothers bagged thirty pigeons in a couple of hours.

When there is no corn available the diet of wood-pigeons is as extraordinary as it is varied. During the latter part of the winter, when root-greens are scarce, and before the sowing of the spring corn, pigeons will stuff themselves with the tops of vetches, clover, and dandelions. When the corn-feast is over, they will fill their crops with the curious-stick-like roots of the wild anemones. Soon after the beeches break into leaf you will notice that they are much frequented by pigeons, which feed gluttonously on their green tassel-like flowers. I have seen the branches of an early-flowering beech bowed down by a crowd of guzzling pigeons, so thick that they jostled each other. When charlock is about to bloom—that is, when the spring corn is ankle-high—pigeons really do good by gorging themselves on its buds. It is interesting to note that pieces of charlock buds are the first food I have found in the crops of very young wood-pigeons, in addition to their parents' milk. I know that many people will smile at the mention of pigeon's milk, yet a section of a parent pigeon's crop seems not to be different to a section of a doe rabbit that is suckling young. Probably lack of the parental milk explains why one cannot hand-rear pigeons taken from the nest before, so to speak, they are weaned. Young bullfinches also, I believe, require a peculiar food produced by their parents only when having access to natural food.

In the summer pigeons feed very freely on oak-galls—those pretty, round, translucent, green, vermilion-spotted globes about the size of a pea, from which come the flies that cause the brown oak spangles to be seen on the under sides of the fallen leaves in autumn, from which in turn shall come the larvæ to continue the cycle of gall-fly life. Much as I love bluebells, I cannot fancy their fat, green, three-sided seed-pods as food, yet wood-pigeons relish them. I have found in the crop of a pigeon so strange a mixture as wild strawberries and the seed-pods of bluebells.

The fall of a good crop of beech-mast and acorns affords opportunity for excellent pigeon-shooting. But seldom is a big bag to be made without a high wind—which likely enough is accompanied by rain—to make the pigeons fly low, and to concentrate their direction toward the most sheltered spot. Those who would enjoy the best of wood-pigeon shooting must be prepared to face any weather—the worse the weather, the better for getting shots at pigeons. Probably the reason why pigeon diphtheria is so prevalent in an acorn year is that it is spread by the afflicted birds distributing the germs through acorns, which they mouth, but cannot swallow, owing to the state of their throats. It does not seem unreasonable to suggest that the disease may originate from the pigeons' feeding on acorns above which they may have roosted. In any case, the fact remains that the disease comes and goes with the time of year during which acorns may be found lying on the ground. Of one thing I am certain—that however badly pigeons may suffer from their diphtheria, it does not affect pheasants, which also feed on acorns. It is reasonable also to assume that human beings are not liable to be infected with it by ordinary means; for hundreds of men have examined a diseased pigeon's mouth with their fingers, and have handled their handkerchief without harm directly afterwards. And hundreds of pigeons, their throats clogged with the cheesy-looking product of the disease, have been handled, cooked, and eaten. Yet there is no record of a case in which it has been suggested even that a human being has been infected by a diphtheritic pigeon.

Shooting pigeons as they fly in to roost is fine sport—while it lasts. There is a brief period, just as the light of day yields to the dusk of night, when one may stand in an open spot and shoot at pigeons coming to a tree on which they have set their minds, and they will return to it again and again, faster than one can load. One of the best innings I ever had at roosting pigeons came about quite unexpectedly one evening at the end of January. It rained and blew horribly, and so I set out for three clumps of trees on a hill, thinking that I might come to terms with an old reprobate of a cock pheasant who haunted the hill when he went up to roost. However, while I was waiting to hear him go up I saw some pigeons flying low against the wind, to roost, as I supposed, in a large wood beyond my boundary. I stood on the fringe of the clump nearest which I hoped they might pass. Would they come within shot? I wondered. As luck would have it, they tacked to gain the shelter of that very clump. I shot two, and very soon saw that I was in for something good. They came in flocks of a dozen to twenty, and all tacked for my clump. What a fine time I had for a few minutes! Sometimes I got one, occasionally two, and once or twice none, which I did not know how to account for. They were quite near enough, but gave tricky shots, and the light, apart from the blurring effect of the wind and rain, was not good. It was necessary to be pretty quick to get in two barrels, for being exposed to the full view of the pigeons, directly I put up my gun the whole lot would swirl sideways and sweep down wind. I got twenty-two, seven of which my dog found on the way home. I never saw or heard anything of the old cock pheasant, with whom, in consideration of the luck he had brought me, I declared peace till the following season.

Wood-pigeons, much to the credit of their digestive powers, eat many hazel-nuts, shell and all. I have seen thirty-eight fine nuts in the crop of one pigeon. When acorns are scarce and nuts numerous, pigeons give rather novel shooting as they flap up from grubbing for nuts among the dead leaves. And they are easier to shoot then, in the same way that a walked-up partridge is easier than a driven one; of course, they are still quite easy enough to miss. Another point in favour of this kind of shooting is that you keep walking round the rides of a wood, and are spared even cold feet. Cold feet, and cold fingers—that is the worst of most forms of winter pigeon-shooting. In winter huge flocks of home-bred pigeons, augmented by thousands of visitors, feast on the greens of roots, preferring those of rape and turnips. But unless root-fields are few and far between, or snow covers other food, the thousands of pigeons which may rise from a field on your arrival are not likely to return often enough to make it worth while waiting; they wisely prefer to go to another field.

When pigeons have been living for some time on an exclusive diet of root-greens their flesh has a pronounced flavour, though, like that of venison, its smell is worse than its taste. Greens quickly ferment, and the sooner they are removed from a pigeon's crop the better. So tightly will pigeons pack their crops with greens that on occasion they must afford the birds considerable protection from shot. I have fired at a pigeon flying over me with no other visible effect than to cause a shower of greens from its punctured crop. To illustrate the quantity of greens a pigeon will 'stuff' into its crop, Gilbert White relates in 'Selborne' how a wood-pigeon was served up, accompanied by a dish of the most delicious turnip-greens, taken from its crop.

Many a time I have supplied my fowls with a meal of grain emptied from the crops of pigeons I had shot. A keeper acquaintance one autumn was waiting for pigeons which fed on some barley stubble; and to pass away the intervals between the arrivals of the birds, he counted the grains of barley in the crop of one pigeon. There were a thousand and thirty-three, besides a few small snail-shells.

Foggy weather brings a famous chance to get in touch with wood-pigeons. The shooting, of course, is not so difficult as in clear weather—not so much because the birds fly slower, but because you are able to kill a pigeon coming towards you before it sees you. In clear weather this seldom is possible. It is that backwards, forwards, downwards, upwards, lightning swerve of the wood-pigeon in clear weather that beats so many men, and has beaten me a great many more times than I care to remember. The man who can get in his shot at a pigeon, that can see him, quicker than the bird can swerve is not yet born. In a thick fog, by taking reasonable care, one may stalk within range of pigeons sitting on trees; and having shot one on the tree, it is fairly easy to get another as they dash out. Two or, better still, three guns working together during a fog can make a good bag by approaching clumps of pigeon-tenanted trees from opposite directions, and by drawing belts of trees, one on each side, towards the third at the end. I know a parson who is very keen on shooting wood-pigeons. He is fond of telling how one day he was out after pigeons in a thick fog, and a pigeon actually settled on his clerical hat, when he had stopped to light his pipe. There is a credible witness of this part of the story; but it is said that his reverence was so surprised that he put his pipe into his pocket alight, thinking it was an olive-branch.

One winter afternoon I met an old retired shepherd armed with a gun, with which he was supposed to 'starve' pigeons from some turnips. He had a pigeon in his hand, and I asked him how he had managed to shoot it, suggesting that it could not have been flying. 'Oh yes, 'e wore,' he said, proudly. Pressed for details, he added: 'I cock'd me eye over the hedge, when up riz a dooce of a girt gang on 'em; I lets fly-like to fright 'em away, and one on 'em was silly enough to blunder up agen the shots.' On my asking how that happened, he said: 'Gawd A'mighty knows—I doan't.' Another old fellow, who got most of his living by shooting pigeons, was asked if he could fetch them off the tops of some tall beeches. 'Yes, I can,' he answered, 'but I has to grind me teeth and pull devilish 'ard.' To show what a lot of stopping pigeons take when shot at on the ground, I give an experience of an old keeper friend. He saw that the ground beneath a beech-tree was 'reg'lar blue' with pigeons, so he crept along a ditch till he was as near as he could go without being seen. He fired one barrel into the blue on the ground without effect, but eight pigeons fell to his second, on the wing, and, following the direction of the survivors, he picked up eight more.

I never have been able to get a real good family shot at pigeons, though several times I have come very near it. Once I came to a gap leading into some barley stubbles and young clover, saw a single pigeon within a dozen yards, and shot it. Just round the corner a huge flock rose within twenty yards. Another time, one cold day in early March, I was going round a chain of fields of young clover, on which there were always crowds of pigeons. (As they kept in great flocks, and had so many fields to go to, and there were no trees, I never got more than odd birds.) Luckily a miniature blizzard came on just as I had located a huge flock on an open field. So blinding was the snow for a while that I was able to get within range of the outside birds of the flock by walking straight towards them in the open. But I did not want to shoot one, or perhaps two pigeons, on the ground; so I worked the flock against the wind and snow over a hedge into the next field. I knew that they must be very thick just beyond that hedge. I got past a wide gap during an extra flurry of snow, and crept down the hedge till I knew that I must be opposite where the birds should be. But the snow, which had been so obliging, now proved a hindrance to my high hopes; so thickly did it coat the hedge that I could make out no more than two indistinct pigeon-forms, quite near enough, but not close together; so I had to fire at a venture. Hundreds—I might almost say thousands—of pigeons swept over me down-wind, and I got one with the other barrel. Imagine my surprise when I went round the hedge to find seven dead pigeons. I would have given a week's wages to have had a fair and square double, at that range, into the 'blue,' which must have covered the white for half an acre.

There was nothing that appealed to me so much as the chance of a shot at wild-fowl—probably because I seldom had it. The sight of a couple of duck once a year was about the extent of my chance. But never shall I forget one first of August. I happened to remember that duck-shooting began on that day, and thought I would take my gun with me on a million to one chance (never having seen a duck in those parts on August 1). I was stepping over a stile not more than twenty yards from my cottage door, when it began to drizzle. My gun was beautifully clean. As there was no object in getting it into a mess, I took it back. A few minutes afterwards nine duck came along about fifteen yards up, and just as they came over my head seven of them were in a bunch.

CHAPTER XI

FOXES AND THE EVERLASTING QUESTION

How some foxes were well looked after—No cause, no conflict—Give and take—Commercial aspect of hunting and shooting—The fox-tax—Suggestions—Foxes and partridges—Rabbits, foxes, and birds—Which pays the labourer best, hunting or shooting?

It is not difficult to guess what sort of heads keepers would demand, if favoured after the manner of Herod's niece, when partridges and pheasants are sitting. Enough to say that the heads would have long pointed noses, and that the keepers themselves would be quite willing to perform the office of executioner. This reminds me of the eccentric custom of a keeper who now has followed his foxes to unearthly hunting-grounds. He preceded me years ago on an estate on which foxes were supposed to be well looked after. And it seemed, from all accounts, that this old keeper looked after them right well. It came about that he was leaving. Shortly before he was to leave he happened to be passing the time of day with a shepherd. The shepherd remarked casually that he wondered what there was in a hollow oak in the middle of the field, since 'it doocedly talked now an' t'an' when he passed on the windward side. 'Foxes' heads, I shouldn't wonder,' replied the keeper, with cold-blooded promptness and a grin. The shepherd thought he was joking, till he climbed up and discovered proof of the keeper's cryptic hint—to the tune of about two dozen foxes' heads. The keeper explained that whenever he happened on a dead fox he cut off its head, 'just in case.'

I have known many employers who never went into mourning if they thought there was one fox fewer, and still more keepers who could bear with dry eyes the news of a fox's passing hence. The keeper who exclaims, when a fox has turned up its brush, 'That's a bad job,' uses those words for the sake of politeness, in the same way that people say, 'I am sorry you must be going.' Were all keepers to destroy all the foxes they could there would be no foxes, which is equally as true as that some districts would be over-run with foxes if some keepers did not suppress some foxes. I do not believe at all in trying to disguise the facts about foxes—everlasting bones of strife between all sorts of people who otherwise might live in peace and quietness. But, lest I give a wrong impression, I will state at once that never did I kill a fox in all my game-keeping days. I do not say that I did not often feel like obliterating every fox within a hundred miles. But I did not do it, not altogether because my orders were to preserve foxes, but partly out of sporting sympathy.

To return to the question of foxes, I admit that a few shooting-men—and a few keepers—may be inclined to exaggerate the damage foxes have inflicted on their game. But the majority of hunting folk will persist in minimizing the tribute levied by foxes on game, and so tend to bring about the very result they wish to avoid. What surprises me is not so much that hunting-people should fail to show sympathy toward shooting-men, but that they should arrogate themselves to dictate to them. To me this seems like pure folly, seeing that the most vital interest of hunting is entirely in the hands of those who hold shooting-rights. All shooting-men and their keepers are ever ready to admit that hunting-people ought to know their own business best, as no doubt they do, so far as the interests of hunting alone are concerned, irrespective of all other interests. The only way to further the interests of hunting is through the interests of shooting. Instead of which, many hunting-people (who are apt to forget that they are permitted to pursue their sport solely by the courtesy of holders of shooting-rights) defeat their own ends by their selfishness and dictatorial bearing toward those whom rather they should approach as suppliants. I think a very small percentage of shooting-men are unreasonably selfish, yet obviously their attitude must have been brought about by the conflict of foxes and hunting with game and shooting. If there were no cause, there would be no conflict.

It seems to me an injustice that shooting-men should be called selfish, even if they absolutely bar foxes or hunting on their ground. For every man who holds shooting-rights has to pay heavily for them, directly or indirectly; that is to say, either he pays rent for the privilege of 'sporting' over every yard of his shoot, or if the land is his own, forgoes the income he might enjoy by letting it. Therefore, whatever avoidable circumstance detracts from his returns is equivalent to a direct tax on his pocket. It must be admitted that if foxes and hunting were of no detriment to shooting-interests, which many hunting-men are so foolish as to declare, there never would be the least objection to foxes and hunting. To the credit of the sporting fellowship of shooting-men, it must be said that they show a long-suffering spirit of give in contrast to the everlasting take of hunting-men. The more you give the majority of hunting-men, the more they want, and the more they will take.

It has been suggested that hunting makes ample return to shooting for all it takes by keeping down foxes. Surely this is an admission that foxes are exceedingly harmful to shooting-interests. Assuming that hunting kept foxes within reasonable limits all over the country—which it does not—there are infinitely quicker and more reliable means of gaining the same end; and free, too, from the disturbance of game caused by the destruction of foxes by hunting.

Hunting is a sport, and sport is a luxury. Hunting is a luxury productive, at the end of a day's sport, at the best of times, of no greater commercial asset than two or three dead foxes, which, if rescued before they are too much disfigured by hounds, may fetch the fancy price of half a sovereign each, for the sake of their skins—their flesh being worthless, even for sausages. Shooting is a sport and a luxury, but at the end of a day's shooting there is generally several pounds' worth of good food of intrinsic value, which either can be given away or turned into hard cash. The amount of valuable, easily marketable food obtained during a day's shooting is proportionate, first, to the money invested in production, and, secondly, to the skill of those who shoot and of their keepers. The total value of game produced, roughly speaking, should approach, if not equal, the rent of a shoot. Working expenses, keepers' and beaters' wages, and so forth, also will be about equal to the rent. So, on shooting, a return may be looked for equivalent to half the outlay—ten shillings in the pound. On the other hand, it has been computed that each fox killed by hounds involves an expenditure of a hundred pounds. So, valuing all dead foxes at half a sovereign each, that is a penny and a fifth in the pound. Even the proverbial half-sovereign cost of a live pheasant, plus a penny for a cartridge wherewith to kill it, shows, at two shillings for the dead bird, nearly four shillings in the pound!

The man who shoots on an average one day a week probably has a shoot of his own, or a share in one. For this he must pay heavily out of his own pocket, in addition to the cost of guns, cartridges, tips, and so forth. The man who hunts one day a week may do so at a yearly expenditure of five or ten pounds by way of contribution towards the upkeep of the pack. For hunting-rights he pays not a farthing. Yet the shooting-man, besides paying heavily for his shooting-rights, must not only put up with a tribute on his returns levied by foxes and hunting, but subscribe to the furtherance of his own taxation, or be despised of hunting-men as selfish, and all the rest of it. Half the sport of a shooting-man may be blotted out by the depredations of foxes. What sympathy does he get from the hunt?—rather are insinuations scattered abroad that his complaint is moonshine. Possibly someone writes to a paper to say that on such a day he helped to shoot a thousand pheasants in one wood in which, during the proceedings, half a dozen foxes were seen—perhaps with the idea of convincing the gullible that the more foxes in a wood, the more pheasants.

On many a shoot there would be quite a good number of wild-bred pheasants if it were not for foxes. As it is, the holders of shoots must go to the expense of rearing pheasants (the net cost of which is considerably increased by the presence of foxes), or go without, unless they care to run the risk of being made a kind of sporting scapegoat by hunting-people who have no understanding of the word 'selfishness.' There is a story of a keeper who had been treated with harshness by a hunt till he became tired of it. The question of foxes was left to his discretion. It came to pass that a meet was appointed to draw this keeper's coverts, when the following conversation took place between him and the master. *M.*: 'Any foxes about?' *K.*: 'Plenty.' *M.*: 'Where are they?' *K.*: 'Gone to ground.' The keeper spoke the truth in grim earnest.

There is an increasing number of keepers whose employers have no prejudiced objection to foxes and hunting, provided their game and shooting do not suffer obviously. The keepers are told that game is the attraction; on the question of foxes there is discreet silence. It is to the everlasting credit of keepers without end that, prompted by the sympathy of true sportsmanship, they try to do what often might work smoothly, if hunting-people would forsake dictatorial ways and accept suggestions. A keeper is bound to serve only one master, but in the cause of sport often is willing to take the risk of trying to serve two. Hunt committees might do worse than establish centres for the production of eggs and the rearing of pheasants. From these they might in some measure make amends for losses by foxes, conditionally upon coverts being reasonably open to hounds, and foxes being found in them. This would be a good way of finding employment for keepers out of place, besides being a sympathetic compliment to the whole brotherhood of keepers.

There is no insuperable difficulty in the way of making allowance for losses among pheasants, or in compensating for them in kind. The question is, Who is to bear the cost of this tribute to foxes? Since it is absurdly unjust that men who already pay heavily for their shooting should be so taxed, seeing that they are growing every year more unwilling to bear it, and that it is solely for the benefit of hunting-people that the tax exists at all, it is only reasonable that hunting-people should bear it. The more difficult problem is—foxes and partridges. What with rooks, rats, and other vermin, partridges have to contend with quite enough persecution without any attention on the part of foxes. I do not think partridges ever will be reared with the same facility as pheasants; at any rate, I devoutly hope they will not. There is no practicable way in which losses among partridges could be made good by a sympathetic hunt. Of course, Hungarian birds might be distributed in the spring to increase breeding stocks; but since this plan would encourage a trade in spurious Hungarians, which it is much more desirable to check than to encourage, I do not think it would find much favour. The prospect of Anglo-Hungarian partridges being eaten by Anglo-Hungarian foxes never would commend itself to keepers. I wonder how many of the foreign foxes sold in England are foreign-bred? or, to put it another way, what becomes of numbers of live English-bred foxes? Are they exported as a complimentary change of blood, or are they—well—transmogrified?

It is glibly suggested that the keeper should dress all his partridge-nests with some evil-smelling fluid, and so protect them. Is not this in itself evidence of need of protection? But what keeper, try how he may, can find all, or even half, the partridge-nests on his beat? It is true that if he has the time, he can find a good many of those in hedges and so on, and, therefore, most liable to ruin by foxes. But, assuming that as many nests as possible are found and scent-protected, at considerable extra labour and risk of drawing to them destructive attention, which otherwise they probably would escape, what good is it all? At best, the hatched broods for weeks must run a great risk from which nothing can protect them. A keeper may blow a horn all night to scare foxes from foraging on his beat. Well, assuming that no fox dared dine within sound of a horn, and all keepers blew horns all night, even as men cannot live on air alone, so cannot foxes live on the blast of a horn, and so might just as well not exist. Perhaps those who suggest the horn-blowing cure would volunteer to help keepers to perform an all-night blast—every night, say, during June and July; of course, in addition to the usual day's work. Partridge-shooting, if only because it is cheap, is bound to remain the most popular form of shooting; and since less can be done to prevent, or to make good, the damage by foxes to partridges than to other game, foxes must give way to partridges. The Ground Game Act really sounded the death-knell of foxes by doing away with rabbits—their more or less ungrudged bread-and-butter; and the present tendency to cut up land into smaller and smaller holdings has kept it tolling. The prospects of foxes grow blacker apace. With regrettable frequency one hears that masters of hounds are finding their countries untenable owing to the scarcity of foxes and closed coverts.

Hares and rabbits now are scarce enough in many districts, in which the time is not far distant when there will be ten men, ten dogs, and ten guns against each hare and rabbit, where before there was only one trio of destruction. The decrease of hares and rabbits not only makes scarcer the more natural and least-grudged food of foxes, but increases the toll they take of partridges and pheasants—not altogether of necessity, but of habit. There can be nothing more foolish on the part of hunting owners of sporting rights than to keep down ground game, rabbits especially, to an unnecessarily low extent. They demand foxes, plenty of winged game, but—no rabbits. What happens? Just at the time when the vixens with weaned cubs would gratefully accept young rabbits, such delicacies are not to be had for love or money. But there are plenty of sitting pheasants, and a little later partridges as well. I do not say a vixen would not take the birds in any case, but being able to obtain rabbits with reasonable ease, she would not make a speciality of hunting for birds. The mischief does not end with the vixen's attention to the birds. Her cubs are brought up to look upon pheasants and partridges as a sort of staff of life, much as children are taught to regard bread-and-butter. Naturally the cubs ever afterwards say to themselves when they see or smell a bird: 'There is a meal: come, let us catch it!'

In this way are foxes educated to live on food that is grudged them. The tendency of the times is to force them to do so more and more. Foxes or game must give way. A man who gave me to understand that he knew the last thing about foxes and their habits told me in all seriousness that he could not understand what foxes now lived on.

There are no rabbits,' he said: 'what do they live on?' 'Don't you know,' I replied, 'that foxes are vegetarians?'

Some people who read this chapter may think that I am a bit hard on foxes and hunting, and that I am a regular glutton for shooting. I like shooting, having done a good deal; and I like hunting less, not having done any except on foot. So I scarcely can be expected to rave about the joys of hunting or the scent of foxes. I have listened to much hound music, and have heard hounds called 'Melody'—which may explain why often a huntsman or a whip apparently has little ear for music. Has anyone ever heard a sane and sober gamekeeper produce such sounds as pour from the raucous throats of hunt servants? It is well that foxes are not killed by uncouth sounds.

I do not wish to give the impression that game is safe from the depredations of foxes except in the breeding season, nor that the sitting hens alone suffer; for I have found plenty of cock pheasants among the victims at an earth, and it is unlikely, to say the least of it, that they had been snatched from a nest. It is a mistake to suppose that all pheasants go regularly to roost after they are six or seven weeks old; a considerable proportion sleep on the ground, even in winter. I have known dozens of pheasants to jug in roots all

Cubs' interrupted feast.

Playground of cubs.

through the winter, and also in woods, within a few yards of ideal roosting-trees. Many mornings are misty for some while after pheasants have come down from roost, and mists cover many misdeeds of foxes. Another fallacy which seems to be popular is that sitting game-birds are safe from foxes till their eggs are on the point of hatching, because, it is supposed, the birds do not give off scent till then. It is obvious that the risk through scent of a bird sitting quietly on her eggs is not so great as when she is covering a nestful of chipped or hatching eggs, but it is nonsense to say she gives out no scent in the early days of sitting. I have had scores of birds snapped up during the very first night on their eggs. A decent dog will detect a sitting bird by her scent if he has the wind. It is child's play to a fox to detect by scent what is not easy to a dog, and a fox needs no hint always to take the wind. A fortune awaits anyone who will introduce a race of foxes with more scent, but no sense of smell.

In the present state of things there is only one way to save hunting from becoming, in the near future, in some parts of the country, a sport of the past—by restraining all foxes during the few months in which winged game chiefly breeds. If this plan is carried out with a loyal understanding and co-operation between hunt managements and holders of shooting-rights, it should prove a happy compromise. At any rate, it is a case of choice between a brief luxurious imprisonment with guaranteed protection, and summary execution.

I have used plain words about foxes, but there is continually cropping up ample evidence to prove that they are not to be allowed much longer to go their own sweet way. Yet I am certain that keepers collectively would be among the first to deplore the prospect of a cessation of hunting—not because of the occasional pieces of gold which they may receive from hunt funds, but because of their genuine love for the blood-tingling sport. There is a less worthy but weightier reason why the extinction of foxes would be deplored by keepers—the same reason, I believe, that is used by those who extol the benefits conferred on game interests, by hunting, in the same breath that they say foxes do practically no harm to game: that if it were not for the existence of foxes only half the present number of keepers would be required to preserve game. This is true, but it cuts two ways; for might not many more people find it so much easier and more profitable to preserve game without the assistance of foxes that they would do so to twice the present extent?

One has heard often enough of the seven and a half millions said to be circulated each year by hunting. Of course, any institution which circulates money must be more or less of benefit to the community. I have not at hand any computation of the sum circulated by shooting, but it must far exceed whatever is the actual hunting figure. How does the money expended locally per square mile of a hunt's 'country' compare with that disbursed by shooting? If there were no hunting, I do not think it would make much difference to the labouring classes. When a labourer is out of work, he may get from hunting a limited amount of free sport—on an empty stomach. If he is very lucky indeed, he may 'pick up a bob' by holding a horse; but there are always dozens of hands ready to hold one rein. If it were not for shooting, how would thousands of families of the labouring class get through the winter? Ask any beater which pays him better, hunting or shooting, and he will gape at you in astonishment, and whenever he recovers the power of speech will ask what you 'me-ans.'

CHAPTER XII

TYPES OF SHOOTERS

The interfering shooter—The 'sketchy' shooter—The late guest—The perfumed shooter—The 'winger'—The man in weird raiment—Some incidents—The fidgety shooter.

My bag of shooters is a mixed one. The shooter who is most objectionable to the keeper is the man who wants to run everything himself, and, consequently, never is happy unless he is interfering. Often enough he is a pretty good shot, thinks he knows as much about woodcraft as he would lead one to believe, and is always selfish. I had experience of such a man during the early days of my career, and I have never forgotten him. We were about to walk a large piece of sainfoin in which we knew there were a good many partridges. I proposed to take it in two beats, coming back after the first on the same ground. A guest interposed his dictatorial spoke to the effect that my plan was absurd, and meant a deal of extra walking and unnecessary waste of time. He never had been on the ground before. However, after being compelled to waste time listening to his harangue, I suggested that possibly he was unaware that the hedge from which I proposed to start each beat was the boundary. More than once have I seen this shooter leave the line and follow birds on his own account; and men who had been acting as beaters where he was invited to shoot told me that he would take upon himself to countermand orders they had received. I took very good care that his suggestions were disregarded where I was in command.

Then there is the man who never will stay where he is placed. True, there are occasions when by shifting his stand a man may get more shooting, or prevent game from breaking away; but you may be sure a keeper places guns to the best of his ability, and each stand is carefully considered with regard to its effect on other stands and other beats. A host often points out the stands to guns, but whether the keeper or the host has selected the stands, the keeper manœuvres the beaters according to a pre-arranged placing of the guns. We were partridge-driving, and at a particular drive I knew there would be a good many hares, which were certain to make for a favourite gap. Leaving the gun whose turn it was to be outside within a dozen yards of this gap, after giving him a special hint that he would get a few hares, I hurried off to catch up the beaters. We did the drive, and though seventeen hares passed through the gap, I heard only a few shots. I reached the guns, to be informed by the one I had specially placed that he might . . . .if only he had not taken it into his head to move up.

Few hosts are to be relied on to place guns to the best advantage without the aid of ticketed sticks, even for beats which they know quite well. Now and again one meets an amateur who is a perfect genius at gun-placing, and probably he understands the organizing and carrying out of drives and beats at least as well as his keeper, off whose shoulders he takes a load of worry. The type of shooting host who is a thorn in the side of his keeper is the 'sketchy' man, with a smattering of practical knowledge, which he is unable to apply, even on ground over which he has shot scores of times—perhaps all his life. He gives one the impression that he is a stranger to gaps, trees, dells, hollows, openings, fences, rides, and tracks, which for years and years he has seen without observing. Two minutes after the beating of a wood in four or five simple beats has been explained to him he has a very hazy notion of those beats or their sequence. Whether or not he tries to make his own mistakes appear to be bungling on the keeper's part, their effect is the same. He hates that the despairing keeper should offer personally to show him which is the second ride on the right-hand side of the one they are in. He curses the keeper to his guests for keeping them waiting, when it is his own fault, having kept the keeper waiting, instead of allowing him to go straight on with the beaters to the next beat or drive. He refuses to allow the keeper to show the guns to their places, forgets where to put them himself, makes a hopeless hash of a good beat, and than calmly tells the keeper that he understood him to say so-and-so.

The keeper cannot help feeling a bit of a fool on discovering, when too late, that the guns have been wrongly placed. Talking very often accounts for guns being placed so that they cannot cover a beat to the best advantage. The host and a guest begin to discuss some subject, and perhaps each forgets the business in hand, or the one may not like to cut the other short. Suddenly it is discovered that someone ought to have stopped a hundred yards farther back, or half the guns find themselves in a cluster at the end of the beat. Then it is a case of, 'Oh, very well; it does not matter now. Stay where you are.' No wonder partridges come wide or pheasants run between the guns.

Some guns apparently are born late. But if it is rude to be late for a dinner-party, surely it is rude to be late for a shoot. At a dinner the late guest is the chief sufferer, because he must eat warmed-up food or go without. At a shoot the host and his punctual guests, the keeper, the bag, and the success of the day, all must suffer. A wait of half an hour at the start means that the proceedings throughout the day are about a beat and a half late. One never can undo the result of a late start. You may hurry things generally, and throw into one two beats that are much better taken separately. The result is that beaters must scamper over the ground, too wide apart to beat it properly, had they the time; stops are told where to go instead of being shown, and of course go wrong. And, finally, after all the rush and scramble, the best beat of the day has to be left out owing to darkness. The second 'big day' covert shoot I managed was ruined, from my point of view, by the guns turning up three-quarters of an hour late. I had the best lot of pheasants that had been in the wood for years; and, naturally, I was very keen that the guns should see them, if they could not kill them. The bag was a hundred and fifty odd pheasants. The guns were wonderfully pleased with the day, but none of them knew till I told them that the loss of time in the morning had lost us the best beat, in which there must have been quite another hundred and fifty pheasants. All the same, the guns robbed me of the pleasure of proving it. I do not believe in waiting for a gun. If I asked a man to shoot, and he were late twice, I should want him very badly before I asked him again.

The gun who cries out for the beater who has his cartridges just when that beater is as far away as possible is a nuisance, and his name is worthy of a place on the list of the Lord High Executioner. Surely if there is a time when he must be aware that he wants more cartridges, that time is at the finish of a beat, when the beaters are close at hand. Men who shoot with guns of any but the conventional twelve-bore seldom run out of cartridges. Possibly the fact that they are not likely to be able to borrow has as much as anything to do with their ample provision. Be that as it may, I knew a gun who gave it out as part of his ethics that he did not believe in taking more than forty cartridges to any shoot. Though he never tried to thrust his rule down the throats of other people, he had no objection to taking a dip from another man's bag when his forty rounds had been consumed. The majority of people who borrow cartridges find it easier to borrow than to repay.

It is not given to every man to be able to pay the greedy gun in his own coin. I do not say that good shots are more likely to be greedy than bad ones, but when a good shot is greedy, his greediness is specially annoying. The good shot has a very practical cure for greediness on the part of an inferior shooter, which very soon cures him. I remember a little incident connected with a greedy and bad shot that occurred before I was out of my teens. It was a matter of a cock pheasant—and we thought something of a cock pheasant in those days. The bird was coming nicely for me, toward my left front; its height was improving rapidly. I was just contemplating the addition of another laurel-leaf to the crown of youthful success, when from the corner of my eye I saw the man on my right put up his gun. I hesitated. He fired and killed the cock—a bird which by no stretch of imagination could have been called anyone's but mine. I said nothing. If I had said a tenth of what I felt, I should have said a lot. Just as we were about to sit down to lunch, my bird-grabber hinted at a pompous, condescending regret that he had shot the pheasant—I suppose really with the intent to draw public attention to his own prowess. In as humble a tone as I could manage, I said: 'Don't mention it. Seeing that you were about to shoot, I thought it as well to wait in reserve.'

The perfumed shooter is not unknown to the keeper. Once so heavily was a shooter scented that I was driven to make excuse for alleged deficiency of my retriever's nose, confiding to another sportsman that so long as the perfume-wafter was in the wind my dog had no chance. The shooter who is everlastingly winging birds, either because he is a bad shot or a good one much given to firing long shots, is a perfect pest when walking up partridges. When the host happens to be a shooter of this description, the keeper and his dog have a particularly bad time. However well birds have been marked, they are not to be found, so the dog is called for. When the dog finds that a bird has run, as is obvious to everyone but the shooter, and goes a few yards from the fall, it must be ordered back. By the time that the shooter has been convinced that his bird is not dead, it has gained such a start that to let the dog follow the trail would be to risk disturbing birds ahead. Thus many unfortunate partridges are lost.

I wonder how many birds I have been assured were hit so hard that they could not have gone more than a few yards after topping a hedge? A bird in the keeper's pocket is worth a good many that have topped a hedge. As the exaggeration of shooters is to birds that must have fallen over hedges, so is the juggling of keepers with birds already in their pockets.

A shooter who was only an hour late came to me in great trouble, the barrels of his gun in one hand and the stock in the other. He told me he had been wrestling with his gun (which, by the way, had been borrowed for the occasion) since an early breakfast, in vain. It was a wonder, judging by the marks on the weapon, that it stood the force which had been brought to bear upon it. I was thankful it was not mine. The shooter merely had omitted to open the action. Another man complained that the top lever of his gun (which, I feel I ought to mention, had an imposing pistol grip) did not work properly. And small wonder, for the lever was glued to its seat by a layer of rust. After considerable excavations with a knife, we got the lever to work; and we explained that the weapon was not an ordinary gun, but a fowling-piece, whereat the shooter seemed mightily pleased.

Some shooters will go to big expense in guns and cartridges, yet do not see their way to have a serviceable cartridge-bag. A lord turned up at a shoot, and brought with him in a brougham (by the way, I am certain I could not shoot after arriving in a brougham) a high-grade gun and expensive cartridges; but so dilapidated was his cartridge-bag that before it could be used it had to be tied up, like a rat-gnawed sack, with bits of string begged from the beaters. Another well-to-do shooter had a cartridge-bag that resembled one of the cheaper makes of satchel carried by children to school. Whether he feared he might lose cartridges or bag, or both, I cannot say, but he persisted in carrying his bag all day. It was at a covert shoot on a damp day, and when this shooter reached his stand he would place his bag tenderly on the sodden ground. Never shall I forget the struggle with sticky cartridges during the greater part of the best rise of pheasants.

Beware of the man in weird raiment; avoid him, flee from him at any cost, and even shoot him rather than allow him to shoot you. And it is well to keep an eye on a man who turns up wearing gaiters of a pattern popular with gardeners—black gaiters, with an intense natural shininess and knee-cap extension. You may feel comfortable next to the man who does not shoot to dress, but dresses to shoot; he is as unlikely to shoot you as to fail in his duty toward the bag. Only once do I remember to have been grossly deceived by the outward appearance of a shooter—and it was a double-barrelled take-in. The expression of the man's face alone seemed to tell one that he could not shoot. His get-up, though not alarming, was hopelessly impossible. He reminded me of the gaitered gentleman one sees doing a round with a grocer's cart. But, by Jove! that man could shoot. When not able to see him I could tell where he was by the way the pheasants collapsed. Two birds coming at the same time—bang, bang! and he had them right and left time after time. That was not all: his birds seemed to close their wings, curve their necks toward their crop, turn breast upwards, and come down bump—all in the twinkling of an eye. Occasionally there was an extra special bird that would turn along the front of the guns; there would be a string of shots, till my deceiver's turn came. I still think that shooter must have lost his kit-bag.

I found myself standing in a ride next to a shooter who never fired a shot. Why, I could not understand, for rabbits frequently were nipping across the ride on each side of him. Thinking he might be feeling ill, I ventured to inquire why he did not shoot. 'Well,' he said, 'it isn't safe to shoot at 'em in the ride, and when they are in the stuff I can't see 'em. How can I shoot a thing I can't see?' I suggested that occasionally he might get a glimpse of a rabbit's tail. He thought he might. 'Then,' I said, 'if you can see a rabbit's tail, surely its head cannot be much more than sixteen inches farther on.' The man who waits for a full view of rabbits is not much help to the bag.

I confess that I have shot at a sitting rabbit, and have missed it, but I never equalled the following feat: A little rabbit born out of the usual season appeared at a distance of not more than twenty-five yards in a clearing where a tree had been felled. Bang, bang! The rabbit stopped and sat up. The second gun was emptied. The rabbit took a couple of hops, and sat on the stump of the tree. Yet a fifth and sixth cartridge were emptied. The rabbit never budged, but began grooming its face with its two front-paws, and, I suspect, pressed its tongue against the interior of its cheek. The loader handed a gun with unperturbed solemnity, but the shooter refused to persevere, protesting that already he had expended on that rabbit the equivalent of its full market value.

To show how far some shooters can jump to a conclusion, here are two incidents with which as a keeper I had to contend. It was not a big day; and I, having a gun, was standing in a side-ride, while four shooters were forward. I was watching an old cock on the ground, apparently considering his next move, for his case seemed somewhat evil. Bang! and the stuff shivered a couple of yards above the pheasant, and, it seemed to me, at a level about right for the beaters, who were none too far back; however, the shot helped the pheasant to make up his mind, and he rose with a great splutter, flew forward, and was neatly stopped by the gun on the left of the man who had fired—well, a little previously. When the beat was done I was informed that there were two pheasants to pick up, one in front and one behind the ride in which the guns stood. The bird I knew so much about was the only one in the beat, fell behind, and I picked him up; but the anticipating shooter insisted that he had another in front. I suggested that the bird I had picked up was his bird, which might have got up *again.* 'Oh dear no,' he explained; 'I saw him on the ground (which I believed), and directly he opened his wings and flew I had a cut at him and downed him.' I had to waste time pretending to look for that bird, and finally regretted to say that he *must* have run. On another occasion a little covert was being driven over a turnpike-road. Just at the end of the beat a cock pheasant fell in the middle of the road, but had vanished by the time the beaters appeared. The shooter of this pheasant was very much annoyed when the beaters declared they could not see it, and said he knew it was dead because he had seen it run into the ditch.

The etiquette of shooting does not permit a guest to choose his own stand, certainly not to intrude upon the stands of his fellow-guests. I have known plenty of guests who have longed to shift their stand, but only one who actually did so, and he was a man who had been living in the colonies for many years. I was standing next to him ; neither of us had had a shot that beat, while the forward guns were having a lively time. At last he could endure it no longer, shouted to me, 'Let's trek to where the sport hums,' and off he went.

The shooter who acts the part of Fidgety Phil does not realize the extent to which he lessens his chance of getting shots. Even if you move scarcely enough to breathe, there is not much chance of a shot at a pheasant which is in sight on the ground, and none at all if you shuffle about. There is nothing to be gained by fidgeting—that is to say, by increasing the chance that game will see you and turn back in good time. How many partridges have received a timely hint to break back from a fidgety, impatient shooter, who will trot to a gap in a good hedge to see what the beaters are doing? Particularly is it fatal to invite attention to your presence when birds, instead of coming over a hedge, alight just on the other side. If they 'find of' the guns, it is ten to one they will not face them when re-flushed by the beaters.

I recall a rather ludicrous but annoying incident at a hare drive. The fence we were lining was none too dense. Just as a whole troop of hares were about to come through opposite the centre gun, he whipped out a huge white handkerchief, unfolded it, shook it well out, and blew a loud blast on his nose. Another man and myself were on each side of him, and had been watching the approaching hares. We whistled softly, and waved our hands deprecatingly. The shooter did not understand, yelled out to know what was the matter, and blew another blast on his nose.

There is a type of shooter who gets wrinkles from the keeper, and trots them out to the other guns as his own. Though he may forget the keeper, the keeper does not forget him.

CHAPTER XIII

MY BROTHER KEEPERS

Varieties of keeper—The backbiting keeper—'Previous to a cold'—The privileged keeper—The diplomatic keeper—Stock phrases—Keepers as sportsmen—The jealousy of keepers—The extravagant keeper—The exaggerating keeper—The 'some' birds keeper.

I BEGIN with the man who has followed the occupation of game-keeping all his life—in some cases even to the exclusion of learning to read and write. It has always rather amused me to watch the manner in which such men seize every chance to emphasize the fact that their brothers who have not actually spent every moment of their lives as game-keepers are not as they. Take the case of a man who, as a boy, did a little boot-cleaning. When in after years he is cursed with enteritis on the rearing-field, while a lifelong keeper is lucky enough to have no such calamity, the latter will glory in running down the former, on every possible occasion, all because he has added the art of game-keeping to the accomplishment of boot-cleaning. 'Why, yer can't expect no otherwise. What do 'e know about rearing? Mixin' blackin's more in 'is line than mixin' birds' grub. No wonder they dies! 'E'll lose the lot afore 'e's done.' This is the sort of running fire that goes on, especially *behind* the former boot-cleaner's back.

Such talk to the gallery may sound very fine. The colour of the speaker's words may afford temporary amusement to those who laugh. But the keeper who uses every chance to belittle the ability of others might do well to reflect that he is making for himself the impossible standard of perpetual success. Into the pit where he is always trying to push others he will finally fall, and there he will stay. When a man is constantly running down others in his profession, there is every possibility of holes in his own jacket. All his attempts to slander really cause those who are fair judges to appreciate more fully the good points of the slandered. After growing tired of hearing a very indifferent lifelong keeper run down another who had started to earn his living as a groom, I remember taking a step which quenched the slandering habit for ever afterwards. It was in the summer of 1907, and in the district in question I do not think there was one day during the breeding season when the weather was even decent for game, young or old—nothing but mist, rain, and cold day and night. The one-time groom-keeper took about four hundred birds on to the field, and brought off a very creditable proportion. When the earlier ones were five weeks old, I had a look at all his birds. I told him he was lucky to have lost so few, and that those he had looked wonderfully well. Shortly afterwards I met the infallible lifelong keeper. He began to slander as usual, going on to revel in, and to multiply, the former groom's losses; so I gently reminded him that 1897, his first year in the district, was a capital year for pheasants, but that the following season, when he ought to have had over two thousand birds, he came off the field with a doubtful six hundred. And this was the end of his backbiting. Another trait in the slandering type of keeper's character is shown (to those behind the scenes) by the furious energy in all he does within sight of the 'gents.' Out of their sight and hearing he does little but curse them up and down each beat.

Though there are scores of excellent keepers who have never followed any other calling, it does not follow that they are superior to men who took to the work comparatively late in life. It is the most natural thing in the world that a boy, the son of a keeper, should follow in his father's footsteps, but he is quite likely to possess no special qualifications for the calling. He may become a keeper only because his father was a keeper. Personally, I have come to the conclusion that gamekeepers who started to earn their living in other ways generally make the best keepers, because the special trend of their abilities had time to mature, and to assert itself. They are broader-minded, and not so liable to pigheadedness as lifelong keepers. I call to mind three men who, by becoming keepers after years in other callings, had made a great success of their life's main work. One was a bricklayer, another a groom, the third a schoolmaster; each of them I have known for years as eminently successful keepers. And I could tell of numberless others whose careers have proved the wisdom of stepping from distasteful employment to the field of game-keeping, with all its romantic fascination. Here their natural gifts, their love of nature and of sport, have found free play, instead of lying dormant and smouldering, and maybe sternly repressed.

Though in my heart I had always been a keeper, it was with a feeling of the most intense pride that I set out on a round, clad for the very first time in regulation keeper dress. I cannot say how often my hands explored the deep recesses of those clean new hare-pockets. I was happier than an empire's ruler going forth for the first time in robes of State; no jewelled sceptre could compare with my hazel stick. With keepers and others who knew me by name before I took 'velveteen' I had several rather funny experiences. One man spent about twenty minutes plying me with questions about my former self. I imagine I did a good deal to curb his future curiosity by telling him that though I did not claim to be the only Jones, I was *the* Jones in whom he was so very much interested.

Never shall I forget the keeper into whose charge I was given when beginning real shooting. He was a man who would now be looked upon as eminently suitable for some rich, kindly old lady who does not give shooting-parties, but simply employs a keeper as part of her establishment. He had no idea of driving partridges, but was not a bad shot, and attended local shooting-matches to compete for fat pigs with regularity, if not success. He also appeared to be an authority on rook-shooting, possessing a reputation—which I at that time very much envied—for being decidedly good at rooks. From what I saw of his rook-shooting, he maintained his reputation—so long as the birds sat on a tree. My brother and I, on every possible occasion, would ask this old keeper how he was, not so much from motives of anxiety for his health as to hear his invariable reply, 'Nicely, thank you, previous to a cold.' Another of his peculiarities was a marked lack of density in the whiskers on the right side of his face. We never tired of hearing him relate the stirring episode during which the whiskers were torn from his face, roots and all, by a 'porcher.'

Many old keepers are well-known characters; in fact, they are almost as much landmarks as the trees and windmills. Of one old chap I have a peculiarly vivid recollection, since he has afforded me many a good laugh—sometimes when my countenance should have remained placid under any circumstances. This old keeper, many of whose remarks and ways appeared to be privileged, was accustomed to the honour of shaking hands with a noble earl whenever he turned up at a shooting-party. On one memorable morning the earl was expected, and the keeper stood ready. Up dashed his lordship's carriage, out jumped the earl with extended hand and a genial 'Good-morning.' The keeper grasped the hand, and reciprocated the earl's salutation with, 'Good-mornin', mister.' Then, perceiving the enormity of his crime, he added, in tones of vehement regret, 'There, what be I a-sayin' of? Dashed if I knows—in coorse I means "my gawd"!'

Another old keeper—who, by the way, possessed a terrific voice—had gradually acquired the habit, not only of making what were intended to be pithy remarks to no one in particular, but of soliloquizing at sundry times and in divers places. He had practically no respect for places, and, apparently, not overmuch for persons. Covert-shooting days were especially productive of his diction. He would place the guns with: 'My lord, you 'alt at the next stick, wull 'e, plee-az? Colonel So-and-so, you can go as far as yer can—and then stop-like. Mister So-and-so, you bide pretty much where you be. And you, T'other Gent, take off and get alongside o' the beaters.' Then, having walked down the line of guns, giving each in passing some final admonition, more often than not of an irrelevant nature, he would take up his stand at a convenient spot in the rear. If the beaters were some time coming on, he would postpone his soliloquy for a while; otherwise he began at once—after giving his dog an appreciable 'reminder.' Though he chiefly chose for his subject generalities concerning the beat, if a fox showed up he dealt with it promptly, somewhat after this fashion: 'Cunning old beggar that! T'others wouldn't be 'arf so bad if 'twarn't for 'is learnin' on 'em. Shan't be sorry when 'e's gone where the good niggers goes.'

A volley of ineffective shots at a pheasant of the 'corker' type would be sure to bring forth a torrent of his sympathetic comment, much as follows: 'Now, 'e were a good un! Us can't allus kill. Didn't much think the likes o' they would stop 'im. Don't know as I could 'er done it myself. Wants Mister So-and-so for sich ones.' As a beat proceeded, and shooting became more frequent, you could hear in the lulls of firing his comments—always made in trumpet tones—of a vividly topical nature. When I have been loading I have suffered terrible torture in wrestling with desire to laugh at his quaint, boldly expressed remarks. Once I collapsed utterly, and had to retire to the seclusion of another ride to give unrestrained expression to my mirth.

A man cannot be a successful keeper unless he is a skilled diplomatist. I do not, however, wish to imply for one moment that the diplomatic keeper corresponds with the cunning, mistrustful, and untrustworthy sort—the man you never feel sure of. The majority of sportsmen know just the type of man I mean; his brother keepers know him as well, and detest him accordingly. But genuine diplomacy is a priceless gift. If the truth is told, one of its chief opportunities arises when dealing with employers. This, I admit, should not be so; but it is mainly the employers' fault. I remember a keeper who was employed for many years by a man much given to showing his displeasure by losing his temper, when he would shout for the keeper in extremely forcible phrases. I asked the keeper one day how he managed to cope with these outbursts, which averaged about three a day. He summed up his method by saying that he 'took ne'er a mossel o' notice on 'em, bless ye!' if he could avoid it. Whether he was some distance away, or quite near, so long as he was out of sight, he would, if pressed, make excuse that he did not hear. This excuse seemed to me, in view of the samples of his employer's yells, slightly sarcastic. But if there was no help for it, and he had to face the music, the keeper said he had long since discovered that the only useful weapon was the flattest of contradiction. When this keeper was forced to acknowledge an outbreak, it was worth walking a long way to hear his rendering of 'Yes, sir.' It suggested the concern of a mother saying 'There, there,' to her baby; hinted at deafness; contained the regulation chord of respect; implied faith in the power of a soft reply for assuaging wrath; and possessed a subtle note of sarcasm.

Now I will tell of another variety of diplomacy. The old keeper of whose soliloquizing tendency I have spoken told me how, by diplomacy of a rather drastic type, he gained credit where others failed—in fact, where there was really no credit to be gained. An employer of several keepers had acquired rabbit fever in its most virulent form. The order went forth that the last rabbit should be obliterated. It was carried out in so far that the rabbits were got down till only two or three remained, and these had acquired, from ceaseless persecution, marvellous cunning in avoiding snares or traps. But few rabbits open many holes, even in a single night; and the fever-stricken employer concluded from the holes he saw that still many rabbits were surviving. Keeper after keeper was ordered to trap the hole-openers at the scene of their labours. They all failed; and no wonder, remembering the small number of the survivors, and the vastness of their experience. Even the privilege of retaining all captured rabbits failed to have any marked effect on the number of victims. Finally, our hero's turn came. Even he could not succeed; though if soliloquizing had been the object, he would have been the very man. But he did this: at certain holes he made, as it were, a troubling of the ground, as if a rabbit had been trapped. And the cry went up from the fevered lips of his employer, 'This is the man to catch rabbits!' From that time forth our hero was clothed in the purple of his craft.

Many keepers have I known to become famous for their stock phrases, if for no other reason. There was one who generally had a retriever bitch with him; and when he wished to stimulate her efforts to find wounded game, he would exclaim at intervals, 'Good dawg—old bitch!' This drollery never failed to arouse the appreciation of the beaters. Everyone would make a point of enquiring of this old fellow, on every reasonable occasion, after his wife's health, for the sake of hearing his unfailing reply, 'Oh, she's sharpish, thank 'ee.' Again, whatever you told him—whether something quite obvious or something quite new to him—would always be received with, 'I knawed it. Ah! *I* knawed it.'

Though keepers, in their contact with strangers, are men of few words, not easily dragged into conversation, and almost aggressively suspicious—let two or more keepers meet, and their tongues are very speedily loosened, making it difficult to believe they are themselves. They vie with the proverbial loquacity of women of all ages. But no matter how often keepers meet, or how long they talk, their topic of conversation is always the same—game. Even when a keeper goes for a brief holiday, his sole interest, judging by his remarks, is for the game he encounters. I have often thought that a record of keepers' dreams would be interesting; but I am sure there would be few in which game and shooting did not predominate.

With few exceptions the keepers I have met have been not only keepers, but sportsmen. Some of the old school counted a successful haul of October pheasants, walked up in turnips, fine sport; others considered the beating of coverts from ride to ride, resulting in a thorough snuffing of tame birds, the crowning example of their sporting ethics; and others scorned the idea of shooting at pheasants which were low or slow while there was half a chance of making them into rocketers. All these men were at heart good sportsmen, each according to his light. Degree of sportsmanship is all a question of training and ability; besides, in estimating the sportsmanship of keepers, one must not forget that old adage, 'Like master, like man,' is especially applicable.

The keeper who, for all the years he can remember, has had drummed into him the theory and practice of 'mopping-up,' would feel his sportsmanship offended by a gun who shot birds before they rose at all. The high-bird keeper would be disgusted at the sight of a flank-gun mowing down birds representing supremely sporting shots for the forward guns. The high-bird keeper belongs, I consider, to the highest standard of sportsmanship. If he found himself filling a post where mops would be more sporting weapons than guns, he would have my sympathy were he sacked on the spot for deprecating the proceedings as massacre. The old keeper who years ago had charge of a shoot I once managed was a grand sportsman—to the fullest extent of his creed. He is now dead, perhaps fortunately; for if he could have seen with mortal eye my plan of beating the coverts, and the positions of the guns, I am sure he would be seized with a fatal fit. I shall never forget his excitement when he watched me kill the first driven partridge he had ever seen definitely stopped. It was a kill in striking contrast to that of other birds alleged to have collapsed after topping some brow on the horizon. I have always felt thankful, for the old chap's sake, that I failed to score a brace.

Keenness is one of the most striking qualities of keepers as a class. You certainly meet with keenness personified when you see the porters who greet the arrival of main-line trains at the London stations. Theirs is not the same species of keenness as keepers'. Porters' keenness is begotten of lust for silver and copper. The keenness of keepers is constant, and is prompted by a higher motive, as when a tired man voluntarily takes a long tramp in the late evening, after an arduous day's work, on the remote chance of adding another head of game to the season's tally.

There is one point upon which all keepers are extremely sensitive—the bagging of a pheasant on an adjoining shoot, within sight or sound of the boundary. I must admit that such an event had a potent effect upon myself. When a keeper personally witnesses the various scenes leading up to the fatal shot, the effect is much aggravated. There is, however, no sight which pleases him more than to see a pheasant elude a neighbouring keeper and return to his own wood. Yet I know many keepers who will behold with equanimity various wholesale disasters to their pheasant prospects, yet regard the loss of an isolated bird during the season as a calamity. I have heard a keeper actually boast of the necessity of carrying a bucket, in which to collect the dead, at each round of the coops. Another would turn out hen pheasants with cut wings into the jaws of foxes without any more compunction than is suggested by the remark that 'he supposed they'd have the (whatever was his pet adjective) lot.'

A keeper who rears only a few score pheasants often will labour under the delusion that every pheasant within half a day's walk of his beat must be one of his tame birds. I remember myself being the object of a terrible torrent of words from a keeper, one of whose woods ran along the side of my boundary. My ground near this wood consisted of seven hundred acres of partridge-fields, on which some two hundred wild pheasants were bred annually. Two other shoots had coverts adjoining my end boundaries. As all three parties concerned went in for a few hand-reared pheasants, I refrained from taking advantage of the opportunities October presented, only bagging an occasional good bird in the course of partridge-driving. The number we bagged in this particular season amounted to seven!

I had been incapacitated by illness, and the 'house' had run right out of game. So on the first day on which I was able to get about, though it was as much as I could manage to get my gun to my shoulder while a flying pheasant remained in sight, I tried my luck in a few dells near the boundary. I had missed several birds with unusual ease, when a hen appeared at the invitation of my old dog, and rising to a good height, gave me extra time to 'align my piece.' She did not respond to my effort by falling to the shot, but more or less towered, to fall finally with a thud on a bare field, in full view of some copse-workers in the adjoining wood. I gathered from subsequent events that they told the keeper, probably on the chance of a pint of beer or a rabbit. The printable portion of this keeper's remarks, when he saw me, was to the effect that he knew very well he was two hundred birds 'shart,' and now he knew the reason why. When I told him he must choose between my version of the affair—with a season's total of seven—or experience next season the reality of being 'two hundred shart,' he reflected wisely; I 'liquidated' him, and we parted good friends. In spite of endless worrying about pheasants, you seldom hear a keeper mourning for boundary partridges.

The majority of keepers are ever ready for a glass of beer, but the less they drink within the precincts of a public-house, the better for their keeperships. In a casual way a keeper may often pick up useful information by calling at a public-house; and all is well if this be his object in calling rather than beer, the curse of many an otherwise excellent keeper. I remember one keeper who simply could not pass a public-house; and the proprietor knew that so long as beer was in his cup he would stay. So whenever mine host fancied rabbit-pie, he arranged that this keeper's cup should be replenished from time to time, till he or his sons returned from ferreting. I recall a good old story alleged to have concerned two Scotch keepers who were accustomed at regular intervals to meet at a half-way house of refreshment. They would give it out that they held these meetings purely for business purposes. It was the custom of these two worthy debaters to stable their ponies in special stalls. One day a rival keeper changed the ponies' places; and it is perhaps better to draw a veil over what happened when their respective wives found themselves welcoming somebody else's husband.

The extravagant keeper is not unknown. He has generally been nurtured on some big shooting estate where the employer's money was no object. But when he takes a single-handed place his extravagant ways quickly come to the surface; and probably it is not long before he is leaving 'to better himself' and—his employer. Very possibly he does not always know that he is extravagant; others may discover this by many signs. There is the signal given by relays of new leather gaiters, of a particularly aggressive shade of brown-to-mustard-yellow, which he is much given to wearing. Then, again, he simply cannot resist emptying those piled sacks of golden maize. Even after the bulk of his pheasants are shot he must go on carpeting the rides with maize. For shooting-days he will engage the services of forty beaters when five-and-twenty would be ample. If he had to pay out of his own pocket for all these luxuries, he might discover in time that they were not indispensable.

Some species of extravagant keepers possess a perfect mania for game, dog, and poultry medicines; the weirder and higher-sounding their name, the greater the attraction. I knew one who so firmly believed in anything of which he did not know the constituents that he used to take a dose himself whenever he felt queer—which was often, and small wonder. He even tried to induce me to have a dose of one of his unknown quantities. When his birds showed no signs of anything except good health, he very soon persuaded himself that they had got a touch of something. And off went an order for a bottle of the preparation of his fancy.

I must not forget to mention the exaggerating, boasting, and lying keeper—unfortunately he, too, is not unknown. Towards the end of a September following one of those disastrous partridge-breeding seasons, the very memory of which is as the vilest nightmare, I met the keeper of a neighbouring place, and asked him how he had fared, knowing that he had recently managed a three-days' shoot. I suggested that the overwhelming rain of June might have destroyed his partridges. Not a bit of it; his total for the three days was three hundred brace—a very fine record for the locality in the best of seasons. Thoroughly interested, I hinted that one of the three days might have resulted in a bag of a hundred brace. 'Oh yes,' he replied, in his hurry to tell another boasting lie; 'why, by Jove! we got pretty near fifty brace the best day. *Three hundred brace*, I tells ye, my lad, in the three days!' I craved enlightenment of this wonderful man as to how so many of his birds had survived the wet summer. Assuming a tone of wondrous condescension, this keeper among keepers was kind enough to give me a general outline of his methods. Directly he found all his partridges were being washed off their nests, he had told his 'chaps' to collect all the eggs. (I noted with interest that he did not personally conduct the collection.) The eggs he 'clapped' under hens, hatched them, and reared 'the lot.' It was very simple.

We all know, and, I think, have considerable faith in, the keeper who never will own to having swarms of birds; when, however, he admits having 'some' birds, we know that there is indeed 'something' in store for us. There is, too, the perpetually pessimistic keeper; yet if you take his pessimism with the necessary grains of salt, you will not find him without a good show of game. But you must never forget that his birds suffer annually from the 'garpes —somethink cruel.'

CHAPTER XIV

BEATERS AND STOPS

The shooter a beater appreciates—Bad guns, bad beating—The beater question — Beaters ancient and modern — A beater's business—Host, keeper, and beaters—Complaints of beaters—Poachers as beaters—Stops—Beaters' strikes—The beaters' lunch —How to manage beaters—The beaters' supper.

'I LIKES to see a man a-shootin' as if 'e know'd what 'e was got at—not lookin' as if 'e thought 'e was huntin' or playin' at golfs,' said one of my beaters. And I always like to see a man beating as if he were thinking of what he is doing—not strolling about, apparently for the benefit of his health. I do not say that the best of guns would make some men into good beaters, but bad guns always make good beaters beat badly. Bad shooting has a terribly disheartening effect upon beaters, who scarcely can be blamed for feeling that their labour is in vain. They can see no point in blazing away all day without some sort of proportionate result. Neither can I.

The problem of beaters, I hope, is not ever likely to become, in the smoking-room, a topic so absorbing as is the servant question in other departments of modern households. Still, the subject of beaters has needed consideration of late years. In some kinds of shooting the employment of dogs instead of human beaters is all very well; indeed, dogs are infinitely superior to men in certain conditions. But in the usual circumstances of modern shooting, men, and plenty of them, too, are indispensable. Time was when people either shot over their own land or that of their friends and acquaintance, on which an annual crop of young beaters appeared with more regularity than game. And so, when a day was fixed for shooting, all that was necessary was to name the number of beaters required, and the whole army was forthcoming from the estate, supplemented by men out of work, and, on the more important days, by hands gladly lent by tenant-farmers. The majority of these beaters knew their work: each ride and track through the woods; each field by name and its current crop; each hedgerow and dell; the fences, ponds, trees, and many other very useful landmarks, familiarity with which saves time, and tends to avoid annoying mistakes on shooting-days.

But the beaters a keeper must nowadays rely on—and often be thankful to secure at all—are mostly mere mercenary outsiders, men who possess little interest in the estate, its shooting, or the bag—beyond lunch and wages. Lucky is the keeper who can command a few trusty, experienced men to sandwich among his raw levies. Many present-day beaters are young men who have not realized till late in the day the wisdom of learning to do something well—men who, as striplings, scorned the few shillings a week they were able to earn on the land during their apprenticeship to agriculture, because of the far more lucrative but temporary employment in towns ; the reason of their high wages being not so much that they were worth them as that the demand for unskilled labour for the time being exceeded the supply.

Then there are the unemployed of towns ; some are respectable men whose trade is slack, and some are by no means proof against helping themselves from the bag. Possibly the latter belong to a self-help band, or have an irrepressible leaning towards practical pilfering. At any rate, they require looking after in a double sense. Not the least drawback of having to depend on such men is that one is unlikely to be able to obtain the services of the same men even for two or three consecutive days' beating. You may be congratulating yourself upon having instilled some notion of the principles of beating into the more promising, only to find the next time you require them that they have got work. Thus it will be gathered that it is often grossly unfair to blame a keeper for bad beating—so bad, perhaps, that it is obvious to the ordinary run of shooters. It shows what a keeper has to put up with. For if bad beating, caused by bad beaters, is evident to the guns from their view-points on the rides, how much more so must it be to the keeper behind the scenes, where he notices each trivial mistake of omission and commission?—points which, apart from radically bad beating, make for a continual leakage of success that might have been. If a gun is in doubt as to how much a keeper in charge of a party of beaters has to depend on each individual's gumption, let him take practical command of an ordinary set of beaters during a day's covert-shooting of known possibilities. Half the time he will not know where the beaters are, or, for that matter, where he is himself. I remember a man who, as a rule, shot well; but one always could tell that he was a bit off the spot by the way in which he would blare out at his keeper that he and the beaters were playing the fool.

I have known men who had beaten all their lives, yet were absolutely hopeless so far as gumption was concerned; some of them men with fifty years' experience of beating, whom I would rather pay to stay away than have for nothing. I counted it good work on the part of one man (whom, of course, I employed only when I was very short of beaters) if he kept in the right beat. When he started near the outside of a beat, and finished anywhere near the middle, his companions were wont to congratulate him. The curious thing about men who are so erratic is that they are much more inclined than others to be indignant if you offer a timely hint with the view of preventing them from ruining your best beat.

There is a simple rule for beaters which is the whole secret of success under a competent director: To do as they are told. Often have I heard a man say, 'Oh, I thought so-and-so.' Just imagine the result of from half a dozen to a hundred beaters each doing only what he thought. A few might think usefully, but the thoughts of the crew, collectively, would be—well, a little too divergent. It is most unwise for a host and his keeper continually to be shouting contradictory orders to beaters. Nothing is more likely to upset them. Neither is it well that sportsmen should address beaters in any but simple phraseology. Once a beater came to me saying, 'The guv'nor wants we to bring a "da'meter" to 'im—but I never heerd tell o' sich a thing.' Another beater complained to me that a shooter had reprimanded him, *not* for shouting 'Mark!' when game rose, but for not giving detailed information as to where. 'When,' said the shooter, 'a bird rises, you should first draw my attention to it by the exclamation "Mark!" and then proceed to describe its direction by adding "to the extreme left," as the case may be; it is no good for you to say "Mark!"

when I don't know where to look.' 'But,' the beater told me, 'I casn't see why 'e should be so mighty pertickler, for he don't shoot no better for seein' what 'e shoots at.'

I often have heard discussed the question of employing as beaters men with a taste for poaching. Of course, no one with any pretension to sanity would dream of importing poachers into a district for beating. But if there are local men who do their 'little bit' more from love of sport than of gain, and all your keeper-strength is occupied with the day's shooting, I think it certainly is wiser to employ the doubtful ones as beaters. Then you do know where they are and what they are doing. Each of such men is worth, as a rule, two or three of the ordinary type, and will spot game that has carried on and dropped (and probably would be lost) more than ten times sufficient to pay his wages. Besides, being a local man, he is not likely to learn much about your woods and their contents that he did not know before. But should a man be a professional poacher—if he is not beating with you, he is certain to be poaching by himself.

There always will be beaters who are not above stealing game if they see a promising chance. But it is not right, in any case, to expose the men more than is necessary to what must be a strong temptation. Here is an incident that occurred when I was helping a neighbouring keeper. During the last beat I came up some way behind the beaters, and saw a legged rabbit stowed behind a stump just in from the road by which some of the men would go home after being paid. While I was telling the keeper that I could not find the pheasant that had dropped back, I gave him a game-card, ostensibly containing particulars of the bag, but in fact informing him of the hidden rabbit. The keeper, after paying the beaters on the spot, suggested that they might like a rabbit a-piece; and there being, of course, no refusal, he put aside nineteen rabbits for the twenty beaters. Quickly enough came an intimation that there was one 'shart.' 'So there is,' the keeper replied; 'but there's one already legged behind yonder stump, and whoever put it there may go and fetch it, or go without.'

How many beaters, I wonder, have made a pot of beer out of purloined cartridges? A case came under my notice of a man who was a sort of cross between a beater and a keeper; he was also the father of a large family, and believed in beer. He had quite a stock of cartridges, which he offered for sale at three-and-ninepence a hundred. I discovered one beater's little game quite unexpectedly; in fact, I never had the least suspicion of him before he gave himself away. He was telling me how he had shot something stone-dead at seventy yards, and produced one of his cartridges, suggesting that I should try it. I saw at once that it was of a special make that had been used by one shooter only during the previous season, and I remembered who had carried his bag.

Once, while we were having lunch, I heard one beater giving another a most graphic description of the recent history of a rabbit, which, it seemed, had remained seated almost till the narrator had trodden on it; perhaps since the question, 'Why hasn't thee knock'd un down, then?' cast aspersion on his personal dexterity, he replied warmly, 'Why, I never sid un afore 'e was out o' sight.' One of my beaters, who neither could read nor write, might have made a cautious lawyer. He had seen three pheasants fall, and as the gun who had shot them seemed very anxious to let everyone know that they were dead as rags, I told the man to go and fetch them. Upon my reminding him that he knew exactly where they were, he said: 'I knows where they ought to be.' And my old dog eventually had the satisfaction of justifying this cautious admission by fetching one of the birds from the far end of the wood.

Beaters are great and good critics of shooting. I have known beaters to be so confident in the ability of their favourite shooting hero as to wager beer by the quart, and even by the gallon, on his superiority over some admittedly useful rival.

When their favourite does not shoot up to his usual standard, the beaters are ready with some such excuse as, 'He isn't hisself or summat; you could tell that by the looks on un.' For the useless shooter who is continually giving trouble about game that there is no immediate prospect of picking up, and every trifle he can think of to worry other people unnecessarily, the scorn of beaters is beyond description. One old beater, having stated the bag of a party of shooters, made this quaintly significant comment: 'But they doan't 'its 'n every time they shoots 'n off.' A man took a shoot in my neighbourhood, but gave it up after one season, though it was said to have yielded him bags that averaged rather more than a beater a day, besides other game. It so happened that the skeleton of a suicide was found during the first day's covert-shooting by the succeeding tenant. No one seemed to know anything about it, but a local sportsman, who had shot with the previous tenant once—and once only—suggested that it was the last of So-and-so's beaters.

For covert-shooting, beaters are not of much use without stops; and stops are worse than useless unless they are carefully placed, and stay where they are placed. There is a very golden rule for the management of stops—that they should be placed, and not be allowed to place themselves, no matter how well they know the ground. An old woman taught me the value of this rule. I had told

Beaters and stops.

Very young hedgehogs.

Tug-of-war with a rat.

her that her place was by a gate at a certain corner of a certain wood, and that she was to go straight there, and stay there, till the beaters came just before lunch-time to take the beat near which she would be standing. I asked her whether she quite understood, and offered to send someone to put her in position. She broke into such a torrent of scornful remarks, to the effect that if she did not know the gate after being about so many years, she 'didn't know nothin'.' Well, on this old dame depended the success of the final beat of the wood. I had expected to find eighty to a hundred pheasants in that beat: there were only a score. Nor did I see any more of the woman till after lunch, when we had gone to another covert, half a mile away. She calmly told me that she thought it 'didn't make much odds where she went so long as she didn't get shot.' Once two very small boys, holding each other by the hand, came to me the evening before a shoot and said, 'Please, keeper, do you want any more shooters?'

Beaters' strikes are not unknown. Of course, if your beaters are town wastrels, who never have done any beating before, and expect to stroll about casually for an hour or so armed with a silver-topped cane, to feed on truffles stewed in champagne, and to receive the bulk of the bag in addition to the pay of a music-hall star, then you may expect anything. But when there is a strike among genuine country beaters there is something wrong somewhere, for such men as a class are too fond of sport to take so drastic a step without reasonable cause. To keepers I would say: 'Never ask beaters to do anything you would not do yourself;' and to shootting-hosts: 'Never incite your keeper to impose unreasonable tasks on beaters.' Remember that beaters can grow tired; that rain, snow, cold, bad-going, and the loss or gain of sixpence, are of more consequence to beaters than to guns. Treat your beaters as human beings, and you will hear nothing of strikes. But suppose a strike is imminent; what should be done? In the first place you must act quickly and decisively, remembering that for the time being those threatening to strike have the upper hand of you, and that you must choose between abandoning shooting for the remainder of the day and conceding their demands sufficiently to induce them to finish out the day.

However, the majority of beaters' strikes are confined to a section of the party. When you suspect this to be the case, the best plan is to make it known that those who wish to strike can strike. I consider that if you give actual strikers the proportion of the customary day's pay up to the time of striking, it is as much as they are entitled to. I am not so sure that they are entitled to anything, unless their strike has been brought about by your demand that they should do something unreasonable. You have at least a counter-claim for more than equivalent damages, especially if they spring a strike on you immediately after a good lunch. I do not know of any decided cases for settling difficulties which may arise from wet, snow, and other causes necessitating shooting being put off. Take, for instance, the case in which beaters do their work till it is decided, say, at lunch-time or after, that the weather is too bad to continue shooting. I should think him a very mean man, and no sportsman at all, who suggested anything short of a full day's pay.

But suppose beaters are booked for a shoot which is put off not later than the day before, so that their usual occupation, if any, is not interfered with, I should say there is no obligation on the part of those by whom they were engaged; but it is usual to give all so put off the refusal of beating when the shoot does come off. When the morning is considered too wet to make a start, and you keep the men waiting on the chance till lunch-time, then it would be fair to give them their lunch and a half-day's pay, even though they did no beating. If the weather about the usual time for starting is so hopeless that any prospect of shooting is out of the question for the day, then beaters who have turned up should be given their lunch. Without throwing money about carelessly, all such questions should be dealt with on lines of liberality—not only in the interests of sport, but in fairness to the beaters. If, however, you care to stipulate with each beater when you engage him, on the basis of no shooting no pay, or so much shooting so much pay, you are at perfect liberty to do so; but you will not find it an easy job to obtain beaters.

Beaters who are in regular work on farms often can return to it when shooting is put off or curtailed, but since their farm pay naturally is deducted when they are lent for beating, they should be paid so that they lose nothing. Beyond the broad lines already suggested, one should not be expected to indemnify piece-workers (for instance, copse-workers), who, if it were too wet to shoot, would not be able to follow their usual occupation. Lunch should be ample recompense to men who would lose nothing by going to and returning from the place of meeting, except when they are asked to wait.

A word on catering for beaters may be useful, especially to those ladies who still have any influence over their cooks. I venture to suggest that some culinary divinities themselves may be grateful—inwardly, of course—for a hint concerning so plebeian an affair as a beaters' lunch. For every beater, take three-quarters of a pound of raw meat without bone (roasting round or boiling silverside are the most satisfactory joints), a quarter of a pound of cheese, and one-third of a quartern-loaf, salt and mustard. Cook the meat, and when cold cut into slices; then half a pound (owing to waste in cooking) will be the portion of each man, and either can be made up into separate parcels with the other rations, or bulked for the men to share out among themselves. The lunch of stops (who in eating capacity equal beaters) always should be made up into separate packages. Stews are not a success for beaters' lunch, not being easy to negotiate unless accompanied by proper appliances in adequate numbers. Meat-pies (one for each man) make a good change, but their ingredients must be carefully chosen, or they will be liable to disagree with the beaters. Hot soup is much appreciated as a supplementary item on raw days, and half a dozen unbreakable mugs will serve for an ordinary party of beaters. Baked potatoes also are acceptable, both to keen appetites and cold hands. Beer, of course, is the regulation drink. Reckoning three glasses to a pint, enough should be sent out to allow four glasses to a man at lunch.

Thus, supposing you are catering for sixteen beaters, you would order twelve pounds of meat (raw), four pounds of cheese, say, six quartern-loaves, two gallons of beer, and some bottles of minerals (barring soda-water). Beating is hungry work, and you cannot expect men to do well unless fed well. I do not believe in giving more money, and less or no lunch; neither do beaters.

The question of beer and beaters is important. Many beaters, if they got the chance, would drink considerably more than four glasses at lunch-time or any other time. But I have come to the conclusion that the most satisfactory all-round load is four glasses. A heavier is inclined to clog the intelligence of the ordinary beater, and to make him mouthy, with an irrepressible desire to give tongue at sight or sound of game. It is no bad plan to offer a glass of beer and morsel of bread and cheese to each beater who turns up punctually in the morning, and, if only in the interest of good beating, can both eat and drink before one o'clock. Many of your beaters will have had an early breakfast (without ham or eggs) and a long walk; and, besides, they are accustomed to dine at noon. I cannot too strongly condemn a foolishly liberal supply of beer. Certainly I have heard of men who, unless they were drunk, could not perform various feats, but I never have known a man to beat any better for too much beer. A keeper acquaintance had an awkward experience with his beaters. Their lunch was supplied from a public-house, and whoever was told off to put their beer into jars put it into some half full of gin. There was no shooting after lunch. I knew of a shoot where each beater was saturated with two quarts of beer before starting; during the day jars frequently were broached, and at night, as one beater explained, they could have 'as much as they minded to squelch.' The supplier of such liberal beer may have meant well; but the man who, after the beaters have had a hard day, says, 'Good-night, men; you have done well,' and tells the keeper to give them a pint of beer and a smoke, is thought infinitely more of.

It is a bad plan to make ammunition-bearers of beaters, especially when partridge-driving: the men have plenty to do to get along without any handicap. But whenever there is any cartridge-carrying to be done by beaters, I think it only fair that the best beaters should have the first chance. It is pleasant to see a sportsman carrying his bag about till he can see 'my man—you know, the old chap with the long corduroy gaiters.'

Here are a few words, mainly for keepers. Never become familiar with beaters to the extent which gives them an impression of equality. Be courteous, by all means, but never divest yourself of that something which shows them that you are their superior officer. I do not mean that you should give an order to a beater after this fashion: 'My dear Mr. So-and-so, would you be so kind, if quite to your taste and convenience, to utilize your stick for the purpose of beating the bushes in your vicinity, rather than the undoubted power of your linguistic charm?' 'Beat with your sticks, men, and not with your tongues,' serves the purpose just as well. Do not shout uncomplimentary remarks to beaters and under-keepers, or issue orders in pothouse phraseology. The beaters will only laugh among themselves, and say, 'Hark at old So-and-so rappin' it out agen!' Moreover, such an exhibition is not a recommendation to sportsmen compelled to hear it. It is useful always to remember that 'Come along, men,' goes a lot further than 'Go on.' You can lead beaters where you cannot drive them.

Soldiers home on furlough I was always glad to get as beaters. Though they may lack technical knowledge, they do as they are told, and they keep in line—two things of the greatest importance to good beating. To teach beaters to preserve a good line I have found more difficult than anything else. Though they may absorb a fair notion of a straight line, they seem to be quite incapable of realizing that a hooked line, a semicircle, or any line which involves a curve, at the same time may be even, and not zigzag. This failure is most evident when you signal to the right or left wing of a line of partridge-drivers to get forward. The third and fourth men probably will bore ahead out of all proportion to the second and first, and, of course, nullify the very object of the move.

Lazy beaters must not be allowed to have their own way. If you watch a party of beaters told off to line out ready to begin a covert beat, you will notice how some of them scheme to get the outside places, so that they may walk along a ride instead of through the stuff. It is necessary, as a rule, to have a beater or two on the ride, between the nearest flank gun and the first beater in the stuff, to prevent game from breaking out. But such posts are important, and I always allotted them as rewards of honour to men of proved capacity. A keen lookout should be kept for slackness among beaters; nothing is more infectious, or more difficult to cure when once it has spread among the whole party. Do not be harsh and unreasonable, but when you see any tendency on the part of the men to follow one another, check it at once. After lunch, especially, I have seen a line of beaters consisting of groups of half a dozen men who were strolling casually through the thin parts of a beat in Indian file. Keep your beaters well in hand with firm, decisive orders, but do not be continually nagging at them. Once lose your grip of them, and for the rest of the day they will beat only as their inclination prompts them.

The beaters' supper is an excellent institution, and, punctuated by judicious speeches, goes a long way to weld together those bonds of sporting sympathy which are so vital to the best interests of shooting. Even if you cannot afford the menu of a City company, you can run to rabbit-pie, than which, washed down with British beer, there is nothing more to the taste of the British beater.

CHAPTER XV

TRESPASSERS AND POACHERS

A lady and her dog — Primrose-pickers — Egg-poachers — Wilful destruction of eggs—A lump of coal—Gipsies—Inferences—An old shepherd—Unsuspected poachers—Plausible excuses of poachers—Poachers and policy.

TRESPASSERS are a greater worry to the keeper than poachers—at least, I found them so. One reason is that trespassers are so much more numerous than poachers, and the loss of game they cause, by disturbing it, is much greater; another, that the keeper is not in a position to get the satisfaction from trespassers that he can from downright poachers. In effect, a trespasser often does far more harm than a genuine poacher.

The lady with a dog is the despair of keepers. I had come up with a lady whose dog was disporting himself among a lot of sitting partridges and pheasants, and with polite warmth had called her attention to the doings of the dear creature. She deprecated my suggestions with indignation, saying 'that her dog was a pure-bred Canadian boar-hound, and would scorn to hunt common game.' My own opinion was that he was a pure-bred mongrel, slightly related to an Irish terrier; and that the commoner game was, the better he was pleased. However, I did not say so. I assured the lady that on my beat there were no boars, Canadian or otherwise; and that if there were, I should prefer to deal with them without the help of her dog. How many ladies, when a partridge has been driven from her nest by their wretched dog, have exclaimed, 'You naughty partridge! how you frightened me!' I often wish it had frightened their dog to death. The keeper naturally finds women difficult to deal with, whether they are disaster-causing trespassers of innocent intent, or 'noways pertickler what they picks up.' The clothing of a buxom dame may hide a multitude of eggs or game. The crinoline must have offered magnificent facilities for shipping the spoils of poaching.

I cannot say that I ever knew a keeper who hated flowers; but I have known many who had good cause to regret that primroses are at their best just as pheasants are sitting. To make matters worse, the part of a wood where primroses are most abundant is where pheasants prefer to nest—where the underwood recently has been cut. I admit that it is difficult for innocent primrose-pickers to understand the keeper's annoyance, and even harshness and blurting anger. Perhaps they have not seen so much as a single pheasant—which means that the keeper is lucky to have arrived before three or four birds were seen to fly up, probably from their unseen nests. Times without number I have been obliged to interfere with the innocent pleasure of supremely happy children. When there are ever so few nests and truck-loads of primroses, Fate seems always to lead children to the vicinity of what nests there are. There is no doubt that 'flowering' and nutting occasionally are used as a blind for poaching. But if those with a genuine desire to gather flowers or nuts would only first ask permission, I think few keepers are at heart so churlish as to refuse to name places where no disturbance of game would result. The keeper hates to see flowers picked and thrown wantonly away, or hazel-stems hanging bent and broken across the rides.

Egg-stealing is the easiest and least risky of all forms of poaching. And it never will cease till greater care is taken by shooting-men to make sure that eggs they buy have not been poached. Hundreds of eggs may be taken without a poacher going off the public road or path. A keeper may not search an individual on a public right of way, however certain he may feel that he would find eggs; and by the time the services of a policeman are obtained the chance has gone. To be able to swear that you saw anyone take eggs from a nest, you not only must be very near, but have an unobstructed view (which is not easy to manage without great risk of being seen yourself). I knew a man who, so soon as the nesting season of partridges began, would travel about as a sharpener of saws. He had with him a woman who wheeled an old perambulator. I got a good chance to watch him one day, when by a ruse I had led him to suppose that the coast was clear. And I am pretty certain I might have caught him nicely, if only I had not removed the eggs from a roadside partridge nest a few hours before. Strolling along, of course, near that hedge, which caught the morning sun (so loved by nesting birds), he spotted the nest, looked this way and that, stopped, turned over the dead grass and bits of leaves in the nest, but, unfortunately, found no eggs. With the idea of scaring him from my beat for the next few weeks, I suddenly introduced myself, and asked him to explain his conduct. He had the cheek to tell me that he was searching for little knobs of chalk, which, he said, were useful for sharpening saws. How knobs of chalk were useful for sharpening saws, or why they should be found in a partridge nest, I never could understand.

One of a gang of four consummately cunning partridge-eggers would assume the rôle of an itinerant musician, violin-case in hand. What was in that case I never had a chance to see, nor did I ever hear the man play. A neighbouring keeper told me how a tramp who had lifted a clutch of pheasant eggs caught himself. The man came to the keeper and asked if he would buy some eggs. The keeper said he might, and asked the man to come inside while the eggs were tested for 'settiness.' From the inside of an old kettle nine eggs were produced, and each of them bore a pencil dot. Needless to say, the eggs were not bought; but the poacher was very much sold. The chances are very much against the most energetic keeper catching an egg-poacher in the act. The majority of 'fair cops' are due to luck. That is easy to understand. What I cannot understand is why, when there is a clear conviction for egg-poaching, the full penalty so seldom is imposed. Five shillings for each egg stolen or destroyed is the penalty—framed, presumably, with the idea of preventing the offence. My opinion is that the full penalty should be imposed in all cases except when there is a reasonable inference that the eggs were taken to feed the hungry. To test the taste of pheasants' eggs, I boiled one that had been laid only a day; but I did not think it at all pleasant. A large game-farmer told me that he sold four thousand late pheasant eggs for restaurant purposes. I suppose they would have conferred on them by menu-makers the title, 'Œufs de Pluvier.'

A good many eggs are stolen by country people to eat. Once, having a suspicion, I was lying near a nest in which were a partridge and two pheasant eggs—marked. A boy, on his way home from school, took them out, gave the two pheasant eggs to his sister (evidently to take home), and proceeded to suck the partridge egg, when I made known my presence. Although that boy denied all that I had been watching from a distance of a few feet, even to putting his hand behind his back and dropping the egg which he had tapped ready to suck, I think I prevented him from growing up a regular egg thief. On another occasion I traced to a woman the disappearance of eleven partridge eggs, which, by the way, had been sat upon about ten days. The woman confessed that she had eaten them all, pleading that she 'fancied summat ta-asty.' And I should imagine that her desire was gratified—by eggs that had been sat upon for ten days. The wilful destruction of eggs is a difficult matter to deal with ; it is so easy to destroy eggs without causing evidence strong enough to prove that they were destroyed wilfully. Of course, it is different when the offender is caught in the act of killing a sitting bird with a stick or a catapult. A woodman, who thought there were no foxes about, told me that he felt sure a partridge had been knocked off her nest, because, he said, there were a lot of feathers about, and a lump of coal was lying near. Neither of us could imagine who had done this thing. The lump of coal pointed to someone living in a cluster of cottages, the only ones within half a mile. I proved to the woodman that no one had knocked the bird off with the lump of coal, for the herbage beneath it proved that it had been lying there for ever so long, while the bird had been gone only a day. Cunning as that old vixen proved herself to be, I cannot give her credit for placing that lump of coal near the nest, to shift the blame for the bird's disappearance. I found where some boy evidently had amused himself by throwing partridge eggs against a gate-post. I removed the traces of egg from the post, and never said a word about it. If I had, it probably would have suggested a rather fascinating pastime to boys who otherwise never would have thought of doing such a thing. The keeper whose eggs are wilfully destroyed, as a rule has served labourers a dirty trick, or has shown a great want of tact in his dealings with them.

Gipsies are inveterate stealers of eggs, as of anything else they can lay hands on with small chance of being caught. Four nearly full nests of partridge eggs disappeared from a boundary hedge which did not belong to me. I did not even know of the existence of the nests till I heard they were gone. I got hauled up on rather more than suspicion of shifting the eggs. I asked who said I had done so, and was informed, the keeper beyond my boundary. I asked why he had said so, and was informed, some gipsies had seen me. I lost no time in telling that keeper that he had the option of believing me or the gipsies. And he saw what a fool the gipsies had made of him, also what a fool he had made of himself. Seeing that gipsies will gorge themselves on a ewe that has died in the lambing season, it is not to be wondered at that they relish sitting partridges and pheasants. Once I saved a sitting pheasant from two gipsy lurchers rather luckily, and just in the nick of time. I was going along a broad green roadside, where lay some hedge-trimmings, when I 'ketch'd eye on' the bird on her nest, and almost at the same moment saw a gipsy caravan coming round a bend of the road—two lurchers all over the place. I knocked out a full pipe of good shag nearly on top of the pheasant; went on unconcernedly, then turned back, and walked behind the gipsies, which had the effect of keeping them more or less on the road. The lurchers went within a yard of that pheasant without scenting her, and luckily without seeing her. Next day she hatched off every egg.

A cunning old labourer gave himself away to me during my first spring on some strange ground. He confided to me how, on his way to work, he had found a fine clutch of partridge eggs on someone else's ground, and suggested that it would be just as well if it were arranged that they should hatch on my ground. It was very thoughtful of him. Another time, a rough-looking man, called 'Old Jack,' was working with a gang cutting and stripping (barking) oaks in my neighbour's woods. Meeting 'Old Jack' one afternoon, when he had been to fetch some beer for his mates, and, apparently, had taken the opportunity to replenish his own boiler, I asked him if the pheasants were laying well where he was working. Assuming a very confidential tone, he told me that he and his mates had found 'a smartish few eggs,' and that he would be glad to bring me down 'some jest about nice nestes,' for he 'didn't think much as how they'd get e'er a bob up yonder.' A man, who gave up the business after stealing his share of eggs without once being caught, let it become known that he stored the eggs beneath the floor of his woodshed, whence his aged father would come and fetch them and pass them on. In a case in which a large number of eggs were stolen, it turned out that, by favour of an innocent coachman, many of them were shipped to a town in the carriage of the very man from whose ground chiefly they were taken.

The most honest egg-poachers I ever met were a lady and gentleman who had taken a house in the country, but did not know overmuch about rural matters. I chanced to show them some pheasant eggs, when they exclaimed, 'Oh, are those pheasant eggs?' Then they told me how, one day out for a cycle ride, they had seen, while walking up a hill, ten similar eggs in a hollow of the hedge-bank; and how they had taken the eggs home, left them lying about, and finally, not knowing what they were, had flung them on the dust-heap. This sort of thing is amusing, but very annoying to a keeper. Of course, all nests must be found in daylight; but your cunning poacher knows that, having marked them, it is just as easy to fetch the eggs at night, and a great deal safer. It is well for a keeper not to put too much faith in persons who tell him of the whereabouts of setty nests only. Setty eggs are no good to the egg-poacher. By the end of June the keeper has heard quite enough about nests and eggs and birds that 'sets 'ard' to last him till eggs come again.

Where there are hares there will be people only too willing to look after them. I had many hundreds of hares to look after, and never lacked a little assistance. There was an old shepherd who was not above 'doing his little bit,' though he was a most excellent friend in respect to winged game, and genuinely took care of the leverets he found among the victuals of his sheep. So, as I had to put up with him, there was nothing to be gained by being too hard on him. His favourite plan was to set a wire or two just off our ground. On one occasion, about Christmas-time, I removed a hare from a wire that I felt sure must be his. When at last the old chap was leaving, for putting in too much time at the pub, I advised him to shut his eyes whenever he came across a hare's run in his next place. 'Why, I never set e'er a wire in my life,' he said indignantly. I suggested that he should refer his memory to a run across the corner of a certain field. ‘Ah, well, it was like this ’ere,’ he confessed: ‘a friend in town writ to I as how ’e wanted a hare ter-rubble bad, and I owns I did ketch one far’n. But I never had it arter all.’ Which latter statement, I told him, I believed—and why.

Curiously enough, the only instance I had of two hares being caught in one wire at the same time was in a wire set by a highly respected labourer, who had the privilege to wire rabbits with a view to keep them down and let the hares up! I knew a groom who might have developed into a regular hare-poacher, but luckily his beginning was nipped in the bud. It was his duty to exercise horses in a field of rough grass near a wood which contained many hares. The keeper found a snare set on the bank of the wood, secured by red blind-cord. The keeper knew that the groom's quarters recently had been fitted with new blinds, and, by asking this groom, when he next met him, if he could supply a bit of blind-cord (preferably red) for snaring purposes, cured him of a taste for poaching. It was the job of another groom to tend horses turned out in a series of fields, in which were some fenced-off clumps of trees, much used by hares. It was noticed that the groom was in the habit of carrying a fold-shore by way of a walking-stick; and the true reason became evident when he was seen to enter one of the clumps, and aim a murderous blow at a hare crouching against the butt of a tree. The hare already was dead and stiff. That groom was converted by getting everyone to ask him if he had heard of the man who tried to kill a dead hare.

I lay hidden one early morning, watching a wire which I had knocked down purposely. At last I heard the thud of feet and the friction of corduroy trousers. A man said to his companion, as they passed the snare, and within arm's length of me, 'Knock'd down, ain't it?' The next time the speaker was met in the ordinary way he was greeted with, 'Knock'd down, ain't it?' instead of the time of day. There are a good many people who prefer to profit by the snares set by others rather than run the extra risk of setting them themselves. And, conversely, a man who is caught in the act of removing the catch from a snare often will plead that he did not set it. An old man who had leave to wire rabbits on my ground complained that someone was sneaking some of those he caught. I discovered the culprit; and on my asking him why he had taken a rabbit—well knowing he was robbing an old man of his scanty living—what do you think he had the impudence to tell me? That it was his intention to take it to the old man, who lived a good three miles away.

A man told me how he and his family kept themselves in cheap rabbits for months. A farmer employed a man to wire rabbits. It soon was discovered that someone helped himself to the rabbits in the night. The man who told me the story lived in one part of a semi-detached cottage, and the farmer's rabbit-catcher in the other. Rabbits continued to disappear, in spite of watching during the greater part of most nights. The matter became the absorbing topic of the two neighbours, who sometimes watched together. One night the rabbit-catcher wished to make a journey to a neighbouring village, and asked his neighbour to keep watch in his absence; which he did, and took an extra couple of rabbits for his trouble.

Once I had the satisfaction of seeing six men busy trying, by means of a line-ferret, to find a rabbit in a burrow I had emptied the day before. Unfortunately, the burrow was in the open, and only about fifty yards from a main road, and all the men escaped, running furiously towards the town. I willingly would have let them off if only they had waited to let me tell them how many rabbits I had got from that burrow the day before. One harvest-time I was watching the finish of the cutting of some wheat beyond my boundary. An old loafer appeared with a lurcher, annexed a leveret, and went off to the nearest pub. On his return, with a jar of beer, I showed myself, and he promptly came up and offered me a 'wet.' I asked him if he thought there were many hares about, and he said he thought there was 'a smartish sprinklin', though he hadn't seen ne'er'n in thic vield.'

The sly poacher always has some excuse—very often worse than none at all. A plausible excuse will save a poacher who knows that he was committing nothing more than simple trespass at the actual moment when the keeper appeared; the chances are even that the latter has seen nothing culpable. A very favourite excuse is that of sudden indisposition. Such an excuse was offered me by two men whom I had been watching one Sunday morning. I got up quite close to them in a spinney where they were trying to dig out a rabbit with the help of a dog. I watched the operations for several minutes before disturbing the diggers. I told them it was news to me that relief from their alleged indisposition was to be found in the depths of a rabbit-burrow. One December afternoon two carters had returned home early owing to prolonged heavy rain. Of course, they never dreamt that I should be about their rather out-of-the-way part of the place on such an afternoon. I happened to see them, armed with cudgels, in the pouring rain, searching along each side of a rabbity hedge, and among some tufts of grass near by. Owing to the wetness of the grass, and to the fact that the men did not trouble now and again to look round, I was able to walk up behind one of them and touch him gently on the shoulder before he saw me. I asked him what he was doing, and he said he did not know. The other, the head-carter, now appeared. He explained that, having killed a weasel near the spot the day before, they thought they would see if they could find another. I said it was unlikely that a weasel would be sheltering under a tuft of grass on so wet a day, but thanked them for their zeal, adding that when next they had a fancy for rabbit 'puddin',' I should be much obliged if they would say so. It was ever my policy to prevent poaching rather than to get people punished for it.

CHAPTER XVI

MY DOGS AND OTHERS

A good dog—A wild dog—Dog-dealing—A London auction—Two little terriers—Perfect obedience—Two tragedies—A beautiful Clumber — Distemper — Natural accomplishments of dogs — Friendships among dogs—And with a goose—A mad dog—Dog-shooting—Trespassing dogs.

OPINIONS differ as to what is a good dog. A very learned Oxford classic was standing by me while I was ferreting and shooting rabbits in a dell; and so was a wavy-coated retriever bitch that I had picked up in a neighbouring town for a sovereign when I was hard-up for money and a dog. A rabbit bolted, and tore round the side of the dell. I scarcely had time to fire before the bitch was off and back with the rabbit. So impressed was my companion with the performance of the dog that I am certain he would have given me a big price for her had he been in need of a retriever. I got a litter of puppies from her, one of which I sold at eighteen months old for twelve pounds to the son-in-law of a rich brewer, and then sold her back to her former owner for the same price as I gave for her.

I was not so lucky with another dog, which I bought chiefly in self-defence. He was a rather leggy, harum-scarum-looking black spaniel, belonging to a publican on the far edge of my beat, and spent most of his time exploring my ground. It was painfully evident to me that the brute had a good nose. The nesting season was coming on. I interviewed the publican, and he wanted thirty shillings for the spaniel, which I refused to give. A few days afterwards I got a message that he would take twenty-five shillings. The nesting season had begun: birds soon would be sitting. I set off with a sovereign in my pocket, and returned with the dog. By Jove, wasn't he wild! I put a lead on him, in spite of which, when passing through a wood, he pranced about and gave tongue violently at the mere prospect before him. I sent him off to an officer who had some rough shooting, and wanted a spaniel—asking thirty shillings. This sum was sent to me, I heard afterwards, in a weak moment, on the strength of the dog's appearance, and my statement that he had a good nose and would retrieve. A few months afterwards I had the pleasure of hearing that the dog had given up his evil ways, and was the best worker his new owner ever had possessed, and that money could not buy him.

Almost all my dog-dealing plums came by luck; whenever I had a dog or puppies to sell, it never was particularly easy even to give them away. I sold a flat-coated bitch puppy—the pick of a litter—for five shillings to a man who soon afterwards was offered four pounds for her. Another one I sold, at ten weeks old, for three pounds to a man who kept her for six weeks, and gave her back to me, with a new collar, chain, and kennel, on his removal to town. I thought I would keep her myself, and began to teach her to walk to heel, to retrieve, and to lie down and stay at any spot. One day a sportsman with whom I had been doing a little shooting had a look at my dogs, and asked me if I had one to sell. I showed him the puppy, then five months old; told him all I knew about her, and that she ought to be worth five pounds. 'Oh, I'll give you that for her,' he said, before I had time to tell him how much less I would take. So I got altogether eight pounds for her, and a new collar, chain, and kennel into the bargain. Her purchaser told me a couple of years afterwards what a treasure she had turned out, and that he had refused an offer of twenty pounds for her. The brother of this bitch I intended to have kept permanently myself, but when he was trained I found that his mother would be able to manage the work, the breeding season for partridges having turned out bad. He was far too good to be put to general-purpose work. A friend offered me ten pounds for him, and half the amount he fetched above that sum after deducting expenses, if I would take the dog to a London auction sale. There was present a man who had bought a brace of the dog's blood brothers and sisters, and he bought him for twenty guineas—the top price of sixty odd animals. I felt anything but calm standing on that raised platform with my dog, especially when the auctioneer repeated, 'Nineteen guineas I'm bid,' and made ready his hammer.

Another time, a man had agreed to buy a ten-weeks-old retriever puppy for fifty shillings. The day before I was to send the puppy off I washed him, and gave him to an under-keeper to take for a run. Before going indoors to have his dinner, the man tied the puppy to a hurdle-fence. When he came out the puppy was hanging dead the other side. In tying a dog to a fence of any sort there is always a risk of his hanging himself. I went to see a keeper, hoping to buy from him one of two little black spaniels which I heard he had left out of a litter. I asked the price, and he said he did not think a pound too much for the two. I agreed with him, and went home with the two puppies and sixpence left in my pocket. The same day I met another keeper, to whom I sold one of them for the same price as I gave for it. Not long afterwards he told me it had fetched ten guineas. I gave a middle-aged retriever that

I had been asked to destroy to a man who owed me a sovereign (lent to him for a fortnight). He sold the dog for six pounds, but never paid me my pound.

During my last game-keeping season I took a terrier to help make up for lack of beaters at a small shoot. She had a wonderful nose, and would pull up setter-like when going at full speed if she winded game. At lunch-time I saw one of the guns fondling her; he asked me casually if I wanted to sell her, and I said no. 'I'd give you a piece of paper for her,' he added. The end of it was that I agreed to let him have her so soon as I could spare her, for she was acting the part of spaniel on formal occasions. I bought her for a crown, on the strength of her looks, from an indoor man-servant who had been ordered to get rid of her, because she was unclean in the house and useless at rats. The first time I took her out she killed three good-sized young stoats, and ever afterwards was game for anything, and indoors, beyond reproach. There is no better dog for killing game over than a terrier, if only one can get it under control, which is not easy.

Years ago I was the lucky owner of two little smooth-haired fox-terriers, which were a great deal more obedient than modern children—as sensible as human beings, and useful beyond compare. Ah, what little pictures they were, and how true! You could take these little dogs among any quantity of game, and they would not give the least trouble; yet when ordered, they were unsurpassed for rousing game. The shortest and softest whistle they would heed instantly, and never would dream of chasing or starting to chase without orders. I remember urging one of them on when I thought a rat was moving in the bottom of a hedge; the little dog made a rush, but stopped to command when within a foot of a tiny leveret. How many dogs would have done that—how many terriers? Both these little dogs would tell you better than a ferret whether there was anything in a burrow. They would steal swiftly but silently from hole to hole, suddenly to halt, uplift a paw, and look round, with a wistful, winking expression, as much as to say, 'Here we are! Don't make a row.' And then they would come away—no raving, barking, tearing, and spoiling all chance of bolting. They never offered to meddle with a ferret. Once one of them was waiting near a rabbit-hole, and a ferret sprang out and bit it on the nose; even then there was no breach of the peace. However well-broken a dog is to ferrets, it cannot be blamed for acting in self-defence when attacked by a ferret; so train your dogs always to make way for ferrets.

Both these little terriers would stand ready at the side of any hole you wished them; and, though every muscle of their little bodies might be shivering with excitement, always would wait till rabbit or rat bolted, and then freeze on to it in a twinkling. One of them grabbed a strong old buck rabbit by a hind foot as he moved from under some bushes, and hung on till, after a long tour of the wood, the rabbit was worked back to me. From burrows with fair-sized holes these little dogs would bolt rabbits or drag them out; and they were demons on rats, which they would follow unerringly through a maze of holes. One of them put in nine and a half hours at a badger. It was the prettiest sight imaginable to see one of these little terriers trotting proudly along by the side of an old retriever, and helping to bring me a rabbit. The little thing always had a look which seemed to say, '*We've* got it, you see.' Both little terriers met with accidental, but, I am glad to say, instantaneous death, during the work at which they were such gems—tragedies of a grub-axe and a spade. The men responsible loved them, but not as I did. Never should I have thought it possible for dogs so to creep into one's heart; and maybe because I so loved them I lost them. Often in the sweet quiet of night I have lingered by those little grassy graves (over which now as I write daffodils will be making ready their golden trumpets), thinking of those two little dogs, once so full of the suppleness of life—so sharp, so shapely, and so sweet—now gone irrevocably to the dust and nothingness of death.

I had a Clumber bitch which I had trained to retrieve feather only. I have seen a wounded hare actually run over her, and have used her as a stop in a ride between two guns at a rabbit shoot, without her moving an inch. I took her away from home to a shooting-party, walking up partridges. When the keeper saw her he asked me if I had a lead. I told him I had, but not with me. ‘Because,’ he added, ‘we shall find a nice few rabbits lying out.’ It was a treat to see that Clumber work. The value of an anti-rabbit training was well proved, for rabbits were sitting all over the place, especially in the sanfoin fields, in which most of the partridges were shot. Often while searching for a bird she would start three or four rabbits. All the notice she took of them was to pause for a second or so to watch their fate. I lost her not many months afterwards from distemper—curiously enough, just when I was congratulating myself on her miraculous recovery. She had it first in the ordinary gastric form, which developed into the pneumonic, and there seemed no hope; however, after a tremendous struggle with death she pulled through the pneumonia. She got so well that, instead of my having to pour down her throat a mixture of new-laid eggs, milk, and port wine, she would eat hard dog-biscuits, and on my approach would jump on to the top of her kennel and wag her tail in the old way. Then, to my intense surprise and grief, she suddenly was smitten with the cerebral form and . . . ‘Beauty’ was her name, and a beauty she was. I had several other Clumbers, but never another ‘Beauty.’

It is curious how dogs, individually, become accomplished in special ways that perhaps they never could be taught. The first time I took my Clumber, ‘Beauty,’ to a covert shoot she distinguished herself by pinching a boy’s nose. I laid some dead pheasants on a ride, and the boy stooped to pick up one, when ‘Beauty’ sprang at his face in the most business-like manner. Ever afterwards, if she had seen me lay down game, she would allow no one to touch it; beaters, stops, loaders, guns—all were the same to her. Again, one of my terriers, when scratching after a rat, always knew instantly if the rat had bolted, seen or unseen—I suppose, by some fine discrimination in the scent. This would be a difficult thing to teach a dog. Another terrier nothing would induce to stay at a burrow if a ferret or another dog were operating on the holes; she preferred to keep watch in the main run leading from the burrow. From the first she took to this plan of her own accord. My favourite retriever, whose name was ‘Floss,’ was an expert at ratting; it never made any difference to her mouth. Of course, I did not enter her to rats until she had arrived at years of discretion. She was handicapped by her size; but where space permitted, the way she would sweep up the largest rat was worth seeing—no shaking, or snarling, or worrying—just a floundering rush, and the rat's tail and snout would be seen on either side of her great jaws. More than once I have known this old dog to swallow a moderate-sized rat alive, taking it coming to her much as a trout takes a fly—plop!

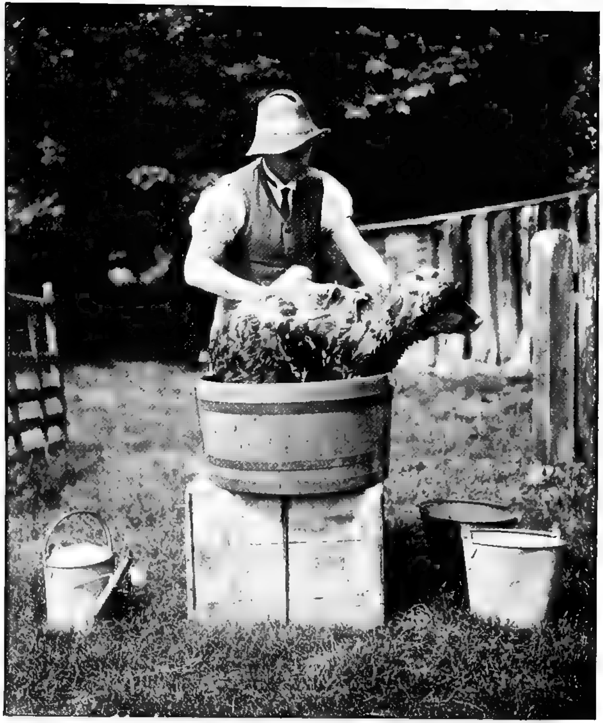
I had a rough-haired fox-terrier, who always was ready to make friends with anyone; but whenever I was waiting out of sight to see who passed a certain way, she would give a low, indescribably surly growl, as a timely hint for me to be on the lookout. A retriever of ordinary working ability, if I had my gun, and showed signs of being in pursuit of game, would scratch at my gaiters when she saw game that she thought I did not. And she was able to tell not only whether a hare had been hit or not, but whether it had been hit enough to render its capture possible. If I shot at a hare, and felt certain that I must have hit it, no urging in the world would make her try for it if she thought otherwise. On the other hand, nothing short of physical restraint would stop her from giving chase to a hare that apparently was untouched, if she thought differently. She seemed to be able to tell the state of a wounded hare after taking its line for a few yards. For if she went on, she never came back without her hare. By the way, when you have a dog that will persist in chasing ground game, or running in to shot, it is a good plan to slip one of its fore-feet through its loosened collar.

There was a sheep-dog, between whom and one of my terriers there had sprung up a fierce enmity, without any further cause than that the terrier had caught the sheep-dog prowling round my cottage. At any rate, the terrier never afterwards lost a chance of going for that sheep-dog, except when there was common cause against a rat. So soon as the rat was settled the truce ended. Hound puppies also were the special prey of this terrier; and a full-grown puppy that she nipped by the leg as it fled through some iron railings that surrounded the premises had good reason to remember her. In fact, none of my terriers had much affection for hound puppies; nor had I.

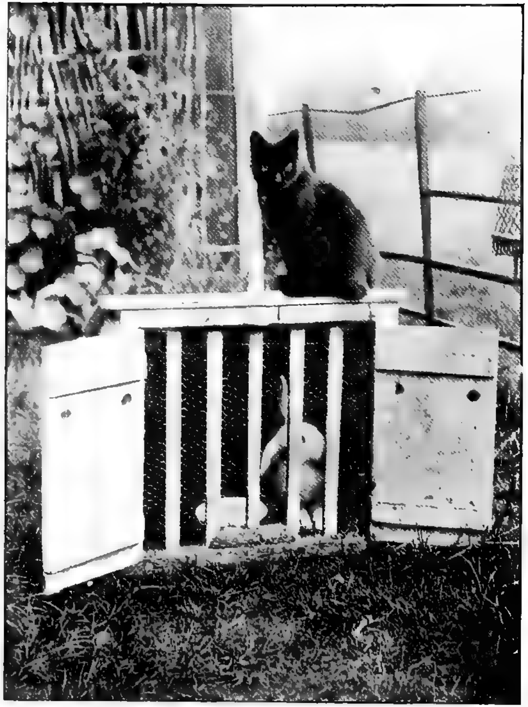
It is natural that dogs that work together should become friends. Yet the most marked friendship among the many dogs that passed through my hands was between a rough-haired terrier and a Labrador retriever, which never did a stroke of work together. They seemed to take to each other from the first time they met; because, I think, each possessed an extraordinary love of play. These two would play together in the most entertaining manner, it mattered not how many other dogs were present. In case of need, the retriever very soon would come to the rescue of her little pal.

For many years I had a goose which practically was one of my dogs; she lived with them day and night, and beat them all as a watch-dog. She would take possession of a vacant kennel, and when she wanted to sit, would collect as substitutes for eggs half a bushel or so of bones that the dogs had done with—great big marrow-bones were the ones she preferred. The goose never would come farther than just outside the gate, if I were taking dogs with me on a round. But whenever I loosed the whole pack for a frolic in the field adjoining my cottage, unless she were sitting on her precious bones, she would come flying with her great wings and quacking furiously. She would alight in the midst of the rabble, follow the dogs as they tore about and rolled each other over, sometimes almost on top of her, and waddle or fly after them back to their kennels. She took meals with the dogs, and always was first to signal the coming of biscuits.

My favourite retriever was a dog of a lifetime. I had her from a little puppy ten weeks old. After her first two seasons, I used her for everything, even to catching rabbits in a harvest-field; and there was not much that was useful at which she did not excel. I believe she was even keener on sport than myself. Provided I were not present, she would go with anyone she knew well—if he had a gun or an iron bar (which meant ratting). She



Dog-washing.



A cat without sin, and a rabbit that enjoyed cold roast chicken.

was very jealous, and would not go with me if I had other dogs (and no gun), merely for the sake of exercise. Once, when I was laid up with influenza, someone let her loose; she came full speed through the open door of my room, and landed on the bed right on top of me. She and a spaniel at the house did many a good day's work together: grew old and deaf together, and died almost together on Good Friday, 1908. Far into the night I had watched by my old friend as she lay dying. Often I thought the end of her faithful life had come; then, as I turned to leave, she would open an eyelid, and speak again to me with that wonderful brown eye that even to the end told of her devoted love. And then would come a moan of pain, and, I hoped, unconsciousness. It was a gloriously fine, cool night—one of those nights when one can hear the wail of peewits as a fox passes over a far-off fallow. My wife and my child were away. I was alone with my old dog; and death was trying hard to thrust its sting between us. The moaning became more frequent. How could I end it all with the murderous violence of a gun? Happy thought—there was laudanum in a cupboard; I fetched it and gave it to her in increasing doses, till I had used an ounce. She slept. The next morning she was—better; yes, decidedly better. Dared I hope? At breakfast-time I received a written message that the old spaniel, her comrade, was to be shot; he was in good health, but had become objectionable indoors. I had to leave my old dog while I arranged his passing. So much better was she that as I moved to leave her she raised her head, and looked at me, as much as to say, 'I can't come with you; come back soon.' But in death they were not divided, for when I returned she, too, was dead.

Once, some years before, I thought this old dog had gone suddenly mad. She was kennelled for the time being in a shed, to which I went to release her. No sooner had I undone her chain than she rushed past me, and tore all over the place, howling. I called her by name, but she took not the slightest notice, and continued to rush about, howling and barking and showing her teeth in the most alarming manner. I was thinking how best to get at my gun before she did any damage, when quite suddenly she recovered her senses. How glad I felt that I had not my gun with me when I unchained her! This is what had happened—whenever she heard me coming she would start wagging her tail energetically, and on this occasion she had set rolling half a paraffin barrel, which was in her shed. The iron-bound edge of the barrel had nipped her tail, causing 'funny-bone' pain. This I proved by feeling her all over till I touched the spot. The mysterious part of the affair was that she was perfectly all right while I was in the act of releasing her. This, I think, is to be explained in two ways: either her delight at the prospect of going out with me caused her to forget the pain for the time being, or by mere coincidence it so happened that I released her during the few seconds of numbness preceding the sensation of maddening pain.

I never shot a dog, dead, unless by request. To take so drastic a step with a local dog is seldom the best policy, while to shoot a dog that perhaps never may come that way again is not worth the almost certain risk of a row. I admit that I have found it a hard matter to refrain from shooting a good many dogs. More than one keeper has misjudged an attempt merely to sting up a dog. Once I thought I was well into a scrape. I was with another man in one of my woods making the final preparations for a shoot. All the morning we heard two dogs having a rare innings in somebody else's wood a couple of fields distant. It was not my place to interfere with them there; nor, in view of my coming shoot, was it diplomatic to do so. All I hoped was that they would not adjourn to my wood. However, following a lull in the duet in my neighbour's wood, my mate and I were roused to fury by hearing the brutes break out in my covert. I went to fetch my gun, which had been left with other tackle, and slipped round to watch a broad ride. Just as I came to the top of it the two brutes crossed about sixty yards down. I let them have it broadside. They turned and fled away down the ride, and I emptied a third cartridge at an opportune moment, so that there should be no jealousy. We watched those two dogs clear right out of the wood, with their tails very much between their legs, towards a big dell of mine on the boundary. While this dell was being driven in, just before my shoot began, my mate came across a dead dog, and some of the beaters saw it, too. From their description there was little doubt that it was one of the dogs I had stung up a few days before—a big collie, sheep-dog-goodness-knows-what-else brute. You may be sure that after the shoot I lost no time in going to have a look for myself. There was not much doubt that it was one of my brace. There was a close-range shot-wound in its brain, which gave me a double feeling of relief.

I heard a great deal more than pleased me about a dog which was found dead, with a swollen head and neck, in a ditch next a fence of wire-netting which marked the boundary between my ground and another keeper's. This dog had been a great nuisance to me, and I had complained about it more than once. To deny to his owner that I had a hand in the dog's death was useless, so I told him that I ought to have dealt with the dog years before, adding that it rested with him to prove that I had done so now. The true cause of the brute's death was a collision with a single strand of wire, and that would not have happened unless he had been poaching. Once when I had occasion to visit a strange keeper, and he was showing me round his premises, I saw a huge bundle of dog-collars—enough, I should say, to fill a half-bushel basket. I asked if he had recently given up a large kennel of dogs. 'No,' he said, 'only I always takes the collar off them as I shoots; but there, most on 'em ain't got ne'er 'n.' A boy brought me a dog that had been a horrible nuisance to me for years, with a request that I would shoot it. I happened to know that the people who owned the dog were going away, and I sent back a message with the dog that they might have got rid of the dog long ago to oblige me, and I certainly would not shoot it now to oblige them. The most pathetic request in the dog-shooting line came from an old shepherd who was past work. He led his old dog on a chain to my cottage; he explained that he 'couldn't abear to see the old feller go shart o' vittals,' and asked me to 'take and shoot un out o' the way.' I promised him that an under-keeper should see to it.

Coming across some sportsmen who were walking for partridges, and had with them a good-looking spaniel, I inquired how they were getting on. 'Pretty well—plenty of birds,' one of them replied; 'but the dog won't kill 'em after we've shot 'em down.' I hoped he would improve, and walked quickly away. The funniest doggy incident I ever witnessed came about in this way. A sportsman turned up at a shooting-party in a suit of so startling a shade and pattern that I had to speak seriously to the beaters about repressing their mirth. By lunch-time we had got a bit used to the suit, but, apparently, one of the dogs had not. The sportsman in the suit sat down on the gnarled roots of a tree, and addressed himself to this dog. I regret to say that the dog did not receive his advances in an appreciative manner, but walked on, and, as he passed, grossly insulted the resplendent back of the sportsman.

There should be better legislation for penalizing the owners of trespassing dogs. Year after year no end of damage is done to game interests simply for the amusement of trespassing dogs. A dog of any value very seldom is allowed to trespass; and to my mind the mere fact that a dog frequently is trespassing is good evidence that it is neither valued nor valuable. Half the dogs that exist are an intolerable nuisance, not only to the community, but to their owners, and are worth no more than the price of inferior cat's-meat. I maintain that the owner should be warned on the first occasion that a dog trespasses; substantially fined, with the option of having it destroyed, on the second; and that on a third offence by the same dog it should be liable to be summarily shot.

CHAPTER XVII

TIPS AND TIPPERS

The custom of tipping—On being tipped—Tipping-time—Touting for tips—Generous tippers—Average bag of tips—Tricks of tippers—Exceptional tips—My last tip.

THE custom of tipping the gamekeeper may be likened unto a footpath which, by existence from immemorial time, has come to be a recognized thing. The keeper, I think, can claim that the practice of tipping members of his craft is as old-established as any other sort of tipping. He argues, on the analogy of the footpath, that would-be tippers, and keepers who would be tipped, are justified by right of user. At any rate, tips for so long have formed part of the keeper's income that they are recognized as part of his wages. If tipping the keeper were to be prohibited by law, a rise in his wages would be the rational result. Including his tips, the gamekeeper, in view of what is required of him, is by no means overpaid. The day of the 'no scholard' is done. Nowadays, to be a successful keeper, a man must be fairly well educated. He must be of smart address, and on shooting-days, at least, of smart appearance, and smart in every way. This the ordinary wage does not allow. Tips must make up the deficiency. A keeper seeking a fresh berth is awkwardly fixed. He cannot very well ask his prospective employer about the tipping propensities of his friends. I think it would be an excellent plan if keepers, on leaving a berth, confessed to their late employer the average annual total of their tips; then, when the new man is being engaged, he could be given a precise idea of the combined value of his emoluments.

At first I think I felt more sheepish over the reception of a tip than anything else connected with the craft of game-keeping. Hitherto I had been accustomed to regard the handling of coin at shooting-parties solely from the point of view of the giver. To receive cash was so absolutely strange to me, it seemed a putting of the cart before the horse with a vengeance. But where there's a will there's a way, and, as I had not become a keeper merely for fun, I always found a way for what cash came to hand. After a little experience, I was able to receive a tip in as graceful a style as any man. I never could bring myself to be obsequious in the matter of tips; rather would I have foregone them all. I made it a rule to say, 'Thank you, sir,' in the same tone—intended to convey courteous gratitude—whether the gift were a sovereign or half-crown, or the giver a lord or a commoner. On more than one occasion I made objection to the taking of a tip which I thought the giver could not well afford.

Probably I lost many a tip because I did not run after it, so to speak. This is the keeper's position: The last shot has been fired; the day is done. Some of the beaters, laden with game, trudge homeward, or to the game-cart; others hurry to the 'house' with cartridge-bags, their hurry being more in expectation of a shilling or two than for fear that the bag should be left behind. But the keeper, just now, is busy with the game, checking it, and trying to lessen the confusion which everyone else appears to be doing his best to increase. Should the keeper leave his responsible duties, and sidle his way to the sportsmen, with some excuse as to whether Mr. So-and-so's gun is to be packed for an evening train, or where are to be deposited the hare and brace of birds for somebody else?—often most unnecessary inquiries, but apt to sound like hints for a tip. Or should he keep himself in the background, risk a scramble later on for gun-cases and game, and allow chances of tips to vanish? For there are sportsmen who think mainly of their own pleasure and comfort, though not unmindful of the keeper whilst he is before them. They are not necessarily mean men, grudging or unwilling, but—forgetful.

To secure a tip, some keepers use every artifice they can think of short of direct appeal. For instance, it sounds dreadfully out of tune for a keeper to tell a sportsman that the birds he has just put up for him are 'all just about fine young un's.' Often I have moved away to prevent the impression that I was waiting to be tipped, and perhaps have lost many a tip by so doing. I regard a tip as a present pure and simple, not a tax—a convenient medium by which a sportsman may prove his appreciation of the skill a keeper has shown in producing sport proportionate to the resources at his disposal. I have met several good sportsmen who would spare no pains to seek out the keeper, and, not finding him, would go to considerable trouble to leave or send him a tip. Here is a sample note which gave me more satisfaction than the enclosure: 'Captain —— encloses a postal order for 7s. 6d. in appreciation of a pleasant day, and would be glad to know what was the total bag.' I am afraid that I have long since cashed the order and given my wife the proceeds, or it might have been reproduced with the note.

The most generous tippers are successful business men, stockbrokers, officers of the Services, and solid country magnates. There are, of course, rich noblemen and others who combine generosity with wealth, but they are not meat for the ordinary gamekeeper. Prosperous stockbrokers and men of business, who do not get too much time for shooting, are the heaviest gilders of the keeper's palm. They shoot to enjoy themselves, and to make other people happy. Perhaps they do not care to weight themselves with cumbersome silver coins, and find it less trouble to carry gold pieces. Then there are those dear old gentlemen of the old school. They do not shoot every day of the week, and, not being so active or so keen of vision as they were, perhaps do not pile up the bag as fast as others. Yet they give regularly a tip of half a sovereign. Their fathers ever gave it, why should not they? And the keeper murmurs approvingly, 'So be it.' The parson never forgets the keeper, and his cheery words are as welcome as his modest 'five bob.' The worst sportsman from the tipping point of view is the ordinary country resident who is fairly well lined with this world's goods. He gets so much shooting—being on the spot and always available as a stop-gap—that he becomes surfeited. He shoots only when he has nothing else to do. From him the keeper is lucky to get an occasional half-crown.

He is a fortunate keeper who 'picks up' a sovereign at the close of an ordinary day's shooting. Tip totals for the day vary, like offertories; they depend on who is there. So far as I can remember, I can count on the fingers of one hand the occasions on which I received a sovereign from one shooter, for one day only. A keeper told me he made his record bag of tips (thirty pounds) after a shoot at which royalty was present. Another said he took from four to six pounds every week, from September to February, for several seasons, which was very nice indeed while it lasted. At his other places his tips did not keep him in beer and baccy. I should say that ten pounds is about the sum received in tips by an ordinary gamekeeper in a season. A good many long for so much—vainly. Once I enjoyed the distinction of driving partridges over the head of a reputed millionaire; and he could hit 'em, too. He tipped me a couple of half-sovereigns, and complimented me on my show of birds.

The first tip that came my way was remarkable for its size, being a five-shilling piece, as I have said in a preceding chapter. I have a special recollection of the first occasion on which I took gold. I had been helping a neighbouring keeper. One of the guns told me he would be shooting with us on the following day, and wanted to know how best he might be saved bother about his gun and cartridges. I volunteered to take them home with me and bring them along to the meeting-place the next morning. Well, we had a good day, at the end of which, to my intense surprise, he slipped half a sovereign into my hand; and so soon as I got the chance I tied it into a corner of my handkerchief, and spent it on boots.

The greatest shock I ever had in the matter of a tip came about in this way. My partridge-shooting had been let, and my services were included in the deal. There were, as a rule, only four guns, and they had earned a reputation for not forgetting those who ministered to their pleasure. However, one morning there turned up a fifth, or, as I heard the beaters describing him among themselves, an 'oddun.' He was a young man, probably not more than twenty-five, of impecunious appearance generally; his gun was rusty, and looked as if it had been bought at an ironmonger's sale, while his shabby little cartridge-bag I do not suppose could have been pawned for more than a penny. Such was the impression given by himself and his belongings that I failed to find among the beaters a volunteer to carry his bag and the score of cartridges it contained. Finally, a neighbouring keeper who was helping me took it as a personal favour to myself. When the day was done, this keeper came to me and said he thought the owner of the bag had made a mistake, and produced half a sovereign, meant, as he thought, for me. I told him he had better hang on to it, whether the two shillings slipped into my hand as I was wrestling with the buckle of a gun-case were a mistake or not. Fishing them from my pocket, I found they were two sovereigns.

By way of contrast, after a fine day's partridge-driving, a man who had a wife and a motor (but evidently had to cut things pretty fine to run them both) handed me three shillings, saying, 'It is very good fun.' I never discovered whether this remark referred to the wife and motor, the size of the tip, or the partridge-driving. Another sportsman invited me to have a drink, as I thought, from his flask, which was cleared for action. I said, 'No, thank you, sir,' but quickly discovered that he meant a tip. Another man would name the value of his tip: 'A nice day—six shillings.' One of my brothers was at a shooting-party where I was keeper. Before we started I handed him a sovereign with which to tip me; but at the end of the day off went my brother, and my precious sovereign went with him. On two occasions at Christmas I received a cheque for five pounds from employers, one of whom wrote: 'I have been very pleased with the energetic, reliable way you have managed the shooting, and I enclose a cheque for £5, with my best wishes for a happy Christmas.'

The meanest method of tipping that ever I heard of—indeed, I should think, that human ingenuity could devise—was on this wise: Two young men, sons of rich parents, shot many days on a first-rate shoot without giving the keeper even so much as a 'Thank you.' On Christmas Eve—when, if there are any tokens of goodwill and tips to be bestowed on keepers they are usually on the generous side—

the proud mother of these twain called at the head-keeper's cottage, sent in her servant for him, and held forth as follows : 'Brown, you have shown the young gentlemen much good sport. I wish to give you a useful present to mark our appreciation.' It is well here to note that the good lady intended to brook no refusal, for she said 'give' and not 'offer.' She must also have intended to convey that the present was the result of combined contributions, for she said 'our,' and not 'my.' The present turned out to be a money-box, in the form of an elephant with a slit in its back. You have seen the sort of thing—price sixpence-halfpenny, to be had even cheaper at sale-time. It was empty. The smallest tip I have known a keeper to receive was threepence —in coppers, not even new. The most original tip consisted of five threepenny-pieces, and came from a parson. It is said that the keeper, remembering that there were five Sundays in the month, remarked that they must be for the 'horfeetory.'

Occasionally I have found the taking of tips rather awkward, though, of course, never a matter of insuperable difficulty—for instance, when I have had a gun under each arm, and each hand already full of big silver coins. This is apt to occur when the guns approach in a mass, like driven partridges in a pack ; when they come in a string it is easy to deal with any amount of tips without being rushed. There are three reasons why a keeper should unload at least one hand of a tip before the reception of another. Firstly, it is embarrassing for men of unequal means to see each other's coins; secondly, the keeper naturally likes to keep each sportsman's tip separate; and, thirdly, a keeper's hands may not be big enough to hold more than a certain amount of coins, especially large silver coins, and he may drop some, which is a breach of etiquette. I have heard it said of a one-armed keeper that at no time did he feel the want of two hands so acutely as when two shooters wished to tip him at the same time.

Once I thought I had lost a whole crop of tips after a very good day. Everything I had done was quite the reverse of deserving such a thing. The guns walked off without so much as one of them saying 'Good-night,' or wanting to know what the bag was, or even where was a cartridge-bag. I thought they must have hatched a strike against tipping. I felt a bit hurt, till, after I had had some tea, my wife produced a double handful of coins, and explained how, while she was feeding her chickens, the guns had come past, and had caused her to stand at the receipt of custom. After many years of experience, I became so expert at handling tips that I could tell their value by sense of touch; when I failed was when I mistook half a sovereign for sixpence, or a pound for a shilling. Once or twice it was the other way on.

A tipping incident which tickled me greatly came about in this way. The day before a shoot, an article by me (under a pen-name) had been published in a daily paper. One of my guns was at most unnecessary pains to expound to me the views and so on set forth in the article, and wanted to send me a copy of it. I told him I thought I could borrow it quite easily. The majority of keepers, being staunchly conservative, do not like the contribution-box plan as applied to tips. It savours too much of charity—a help-the-poor-keeper sort of arrangement. On the other hand, they appreciate the modern method of placing the guns, by numbers drawn by lot, for it removes all suspicion of favouring the heaviest tippers.

My last tip was six shillings, in florins. The day was January 29, 1909. I have the coins safely wrapped up and labelled, and shall keep them—at any rate, I shall try to—so that some day I may have them mounted on velvet as memorials of those game-keeping days of old.

CHAPTER XVIII

ODDS AND ENDS

High-grade nobility—The elusiveness of cartridge-bags—Rabbits as medicine — Shooting accidents — Lady shooters — What is a 'reared' pheasant?—Are keepers good shots?—A cat and a rabbit—A keeper's feat—A very popular fallacy—Keepers and poison—Artfulness of rabbits—Ferrets—Mammoth nests—Moles and nests—Wild honey—A reward—'Coom to daddy!'

There was always a difficulty in addressing lordly persons, and I am afraid I never properly mastered the correct compromise between the devotional and barristerial 'my lord.' I called my first marquis 'sir,' after giving myself a special course of training in saying 'm' lord.' However, I dare say he appreciated it by way of a change. Another incident of my contact with high-grade nobility was when I met a lord on his own estate and mistook him for his keeper; he was going about with his breeches unbuttoned below the knee and no gaiters. At a cub-hunting meet I got into conversation with a duke, thinking that he was a farmer.

It was at a millionaire's partridge-drive that I witnessed a terrible shooting fiasco. It was the first day, on some rented ground. There were six guns and six loaders, keepers and beaters innumerable, a pack of retrievers, several game and lunch vans, and, of course, motors. I do not think more than about twenty-five partridges came in sight of the guns all day. Never did I get so tired of a day, which mercifully was abandoned before the usual time. The only part I enjoyed was the lunch, of which there were three grades—the guns', the keepers' and loaders', and the beaters'. So excellent were the chicken, ham, and jelly-coated cutlets that I am ashamed to say I practically dispensed with bread.

Valets supply the very essence of shooting blaséness, and some of them are remarkable for a wealth and facility of thunder and lightning speech. Phonograph records of some of the conversations between valets and keepers in the gun-room of a large country-house would be quite enough to make their employers' hair stand on end. Keepers always are glad when a sportsman arrives in charge of a valet—if only for the fact that a valet prevents the escape of cartridge-bags. I have known the elusiveness of cartridge-bags to be the cause of no end of bother. It all falls on the shoulders of the keeper—why, I never could imagine. Often a keeper has not even heard of a man before, to say nothing of his cartridge-bag. A man once complained to me of the loss of his cartridge-bags, saying that they had started on a journey in charge of his wife. I did not know his wife—even by sight; and I felt like telling him that I had heard of wives wearing the trousers, but never cartridge-bags. Cartridge-bags always should be attached to a gun-case or magazine, and not treated as miscellaneous baggage. There are plenty of men who will spend gold on the purchase of their cartridge-bags, yet, apparently, begrudge the few pence to have their names (not merely their initials) put on them plainly. Any cartridge-bag with a narrow strap or webbing ought to be carried by the owner.

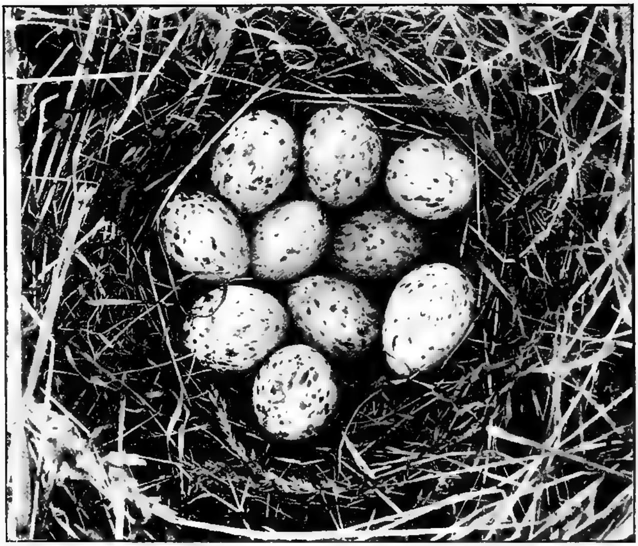
To carry about two or three hundred cartridges is not the lightest of occupations. Still, the weight of cartridges never gave me much trouble, especially when there was a fair prospect of their being shot off, preferably on my own beat. Yet the sling of a cartridge-bag, where it pressed, always produced a pain like a cross between sciatica and toothache, even after carrying for an hour or two a bag with only fifty cartridges in it. The pain would remain for hours after the cause had been removed. I found it a good plan to stuff my handkerchief over the spot, beneath my coat,

A keeper must command respect, but avoid familiarity. It is always a good sign when one hears a keeper spoken of as 'Mr. So-and-so' by labourers, though his employer may be merely 'Old So-and-so.' A link of friendliness between the keeper and the labouring community does for the good of game what the most energetic keeper cannot do by himself. For the keeper personally to make 'kind inquiries' at a labourer's cottage where there is sickness never does any harm, especially if a visiting-card in the shape of a rabbit is left behind. Whether a caller is a keeper or not, the wife of a sick labourer loves to describe all the morbid details of the case: anything to do with spattered blood she is certain to glory in elaborating. When the kind inquirer happens to be the keeper, she is equally certain, sooner or later, to work round to the question of rabbits as medicine. For instance, after this fashion: 'There, he haven't eat ne'er a marsel o' food this two days; 'e don't sim to fancy nothin', 'cept when I tell'd un jest now 'e would die o' starvation, 'e did sorter mutter summat about the leg of a rabbut.' Then is the time for the keeper to have in his pocket a rabbit that he does not want to carry any farther. Only once have I known a rabbit not to be thankfully received. One Saturday evening, in the summer, I met an old man on his way home from work, to whom I knew a rabbit was a treat. Producing a black one I had just shot, I handed it to him with a kindly meant remark about his Sunday's dinner. Much to my surprise, he declared it was the devil, and refused even to touch it. He accepted a brown one which had shared my pocket with the devil, and went on his way rejoicing.

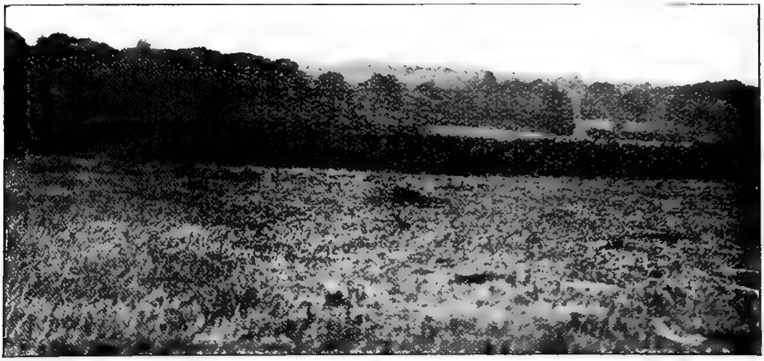
It is a marvel that there are not more shooting accidents. The great objection to a careless man with a gun is that he is far more likely to shoot somebody else than himself. I have seen two people escape by inches what must have been fatal accidents. But ought one to say 'accident'? for in each instance it was nothing but sheer carelessness: the shooters, carrying a hammerless gun under the arm, could not take the trouble to look what they were doing, but felt for the safety-bolt, and pushed a trigger instead. When a shooter is turning round, it is a golden rule not to have a finger on the trigger, no matter how safely the muzzle may be pointing. A foot may trip in a bramble or against a stub, and—down comes the muzzle to the level of men's heads and hearts. And off goes the gun. By paying ten shillings anyone is entitled to carry and use a gun. Ought there not to be some regulation demanding proof that each individual understands the safe handling of a gun before he or she is granted a licence? I never had to deal with a lady shooter, and I hope I never shall.

What is the definition of a 'reared' pheasant? In these days, when there is so much letting of shooting, it is important that the term 'reared' should have some definite meaning. There is a very great difference between reared pheasants and pheasants that are being reared. A representation by a lessor of shooting that 'I have reared a thousand pheasants,' or 'I will rear a thousand pheasants,' is not at all the same as 'I am rearing a thousand pheasants,' which he might reasonably hold to mean, 'I am trying to rear a thousand pheasants.' Therefore, I think, if a man says, 'I have reared so many pheasants,' or 'I will rear so many,' it may be assumed that he undertakes to supply so many pheasants of not less than five weeks old, when they are fit to be turned into covert, and are practically safe from losses by disease. Given so many pheasants turned into covert at not less than five weeks old, how many is it reasonable to expect to kill? I should say three-quarters, unless the shoot has unusually detractive features, such as bad coverts near the boundary (beyond which are good coverts with every attraction), no stock of wild birds, and few rabbits, much vermin, and many foxes. It is not unusual in fair circumstances to account for the same number, or even more than the same number, of birds as were turned into covert. Generally speaking, an ordinary stock of wild birds may be relied upon to cancel ordinary losses among hand-reared birds; but it is impossible to lay down any hard and fast rule applicable to all sorts and conditions of shoots. The circumstances of no two shoots are precisely the same. To account for five hundred pheasants out of a thousand may be as much a feather in the cap of one keeper as the bagging of the thousand by another. Keepers are not given to exaggerating the number of birds turned into covert; it would be cutting their own throats.

No keeper appreciates bad guns, unless he is anxious to spare his stock. Keepers, as a class, are not what some people are pleased to call 'dead shots.' Now and then I have met one who was very good indeed so far as his experience went, but the majority of keepers would be useless if set to deal with driven birds. The head-keeper on one of the largest estates in Hampshire was a dreadfully bad shot; he was so bad that he was obliged to trap or snare, or otherwise poach, the greater part of the game which he was supposed to shoot for his employer's larder. After a time it began to be noised abroad by the ladies of the kitchen that shot-marks seldom were to be found on the game. This, of course, did not help the keeper to shoot any better; but to protect himself he hit on the plan of blazing at each head of game after he had trapped it. Another keeper was a still worse shot, but he openly confessed that though he had tried hard for many long years, he had succeeded in hitting only one object while it was moving—a rook—when he wasn't trying. I have made my share of misses, but, curiously enough, I do not remember ever to have missed a poaching cat, and I have shot at—well, several.



NEST AND EGGS OF LANDRAIL. IT IS A MARVEL HOW SO SMALL A BIRD MANAGED TO COVER 10 EGGS, EACH ABOUT THE SIZE OF A PARTRIDGE'S EGG.



THE OWNER OF THE ABOVE NEST. THE ONLY LANDRAIL I EVER BAGGED WITH A CAMERA (HELD IN THE HAND).

In the matter of poaching cats nothing was to be gained by letting one barrel know what the other had shot. One summer evening I was making my way along a cart-way between one of my woods and the high wall of the garden belonging to the 'big house.' Facing a double door in the wall was a ride through the wood, and just as I got opposite the ride a non-local cat began to cross it about thirty yards up. I bowled the cat over, and went up the ride to remove it. Just as I reached the spot where the cat lay I heard someone opening the garden door. The head-gardener appeared about a fifth of a second after I had chucked the cat into the stuff and fished from my pocket a nice young rabbit, which, luckily, I had shot that evening half a mile away. I strolled down the ride towards the gardener, legging the rabbit on my way. Having remarked, as I smoothed the fur of its back with the blade of my knife, that it was a fine 'young un' for the time of year, I asked him to save me the trouble of carrying it home. I disposed of the cat later on.

A very old keeper friend, who seldom missed a walked-up bird, performed the following feat. Having to get some birds, he set out with an old pointer for a large turnip-field. He fired at thirteen single birds in succession, winged them all, and his pointer gathered them all. The largest proportion of runners I ever saw manufactured was ten out of fourteen birds dropped by two guns one hot September afternoon. There was not an atom of scent, but, trying again at sundown, my old dog got them all.

There is a very popular fallacy that a keeper may help himself to what game he likes. By right of custom he may have rabbits and pigeons for his own use only, and not to sell for his own profit (unless by agreement). As to game in the ordinary sense, I should say he has no more right to it than a gardener to grapes, or a carter to oats. I have been asked for game (presumably free of middleman's profit) by people who gave me to understand that they would 'satisfy' me. And a lady wrote to me: 'Mrs. So-and-so wishes,' etc. I replied: 'Mr. Jones presents his compliments to Mrs. So-and-so, and wishes to inform her that he is a gamekeeper, and not a game-dealer.' I do not suppose one member of the public in ten thousand knows that neither a gamekeeper nor his employer may sell game to anyone but a licensed dealer. Considering the ease with which keepers can help themselves to game, and the smallness of the risk of detection, their honesty, collectively, is much to their credit. I would suggest to employers that they should think of the keeper when game is being given away. A present of an occasional (not too occasional) brace of birds or a hare is the best way of telling the keeper that his integrity is appreciated.

There is only one risk in giving the keeper game—that he will reproduce it in the next day's bag; but the trick may be excused, since he thereby denies himself a good dinner, to flatter the game-book. If a keeper is given no game, he is apt to infer that he is credited with helping himself; perhaps that he is supposed to help himself. One keeper, fearing that he might entirely forget the taste of game, made so bold as to ask for a brace of pheasants. 'Whatever do you want them for?' he was asked; and answered, 'To eat.'

Reluctance to use poison is another point to the credit of keepers. They feel that it is not playing the game; they love to know that they have outwitted the cunning of vermin; and so, apart from other considerations, keepers prefer the exercise of the true spirit of woodcraft, unsullied by exclusion of the sporting chance. Of course, where rats are numerous, it seldom is possible to deal with them by trapping and so forth only. An old keeper, who scorned the use of poison where trap and gun would serve, told me of a poisoning venture in the days of his youth. His beat was about seven thousand acres, in a district where carrion crows and magpies were so numerous that, in spite of devoting most of his time to trapping and shooting them, he seemed to make no impression on their numbers. He had been given a powder called 'hog's-bean,' and though he told me it could be got in the form of a bean, I think he must have meant hog's-bane or henbane. At any rate, he skinned three rabbits, scored their flesh, which he dusted with the powder, and tied the carcasses high up in three trees in a little covert away out on the Hampshire downs. When he returned the next day nothing but the skeletons of the rabbits remained; and he actually picked up no fewer than forty-seven crows and magpies beneath the first rabbit-baited tree. I do not deny that a few keepers may abuse the use of poison, but I know that many an innocent keeper has been blamed for the death of cats and dogs, which evidently had 'picked up something.' Cottagers use poison-paste on bread and butter for mice with as little compunction as blacking for boots. Once a lady met me in a lonely lane, and tackled me in the most aggressive way about her cat. I told her it was news to me that she had a cat, denied that I had anything to do with its end, and expressed a polite regret. As she clung to her cocksure attitude, I suggested that for two guineas the kind of poison that had finished her cat might be ascertained. I could have put her on the track of her own gardener, who, I knew, was losing sweet-peas by mice innumerable. No decent keeper ever dreams of interfering with cats that don't poach.

It is a mistake to suppose that there are no rabbits in a wood because none can be got by ferreting. Wiring, trapping, and ferreting are all very well when the object is merely to kill off some of many rabbits; but the gun in good hands will account for a hundred rabbits in a day in woods in which the best men might ferret all day for a couple. Burrows may appear used, but rabbits soon get too artful to lie in them. When it has been proved that there are no rabbits in a wood, above or below ground, every yard of hedgerow and field should be searched. It is astonishing, when the rabbits of a wood have been thoroughly persecuted, how far out in the fields they will go, and in what curious places they will hide themselves. The inside of a farm-roller is a very likely place for a rabbit to sit; once I found one under the name-plate of an iron harrow in the middle of a large bare field. Another time when we were cleaning up the rabbits, I was crossing a field of rough grass, when up jumped a rabbit, and I bowled it over. Just as I was picking it up, up jumped another, and I served it the same. When I was picking up the second, up jumped a third, and I got it too. Well, naturally, I thought there must be several more, so I set to work and did every inch of that thirty-acre field—without finding another rabbit. I appreciate a fast rabbit running across me at about fifty yards as much as any shot. A most murderous shot at rabbits was brought off by a farmer; watching his opportunity towards the finish of a field of corn, he blazed down a furrow, and killed nine.

Ferrets are not at all profitable creatures to breed for sale; and it is cheaper to buy grown-up young ferrets in September for half a crown each than to breed and rear them. If you want ferrets to be pleasant to use, the great thing is to handle them frequently and quietly—never grab at them. I judged their handling education complete when my ferrets showed no objection to being picked up by the skin of their stomach. The most docile of ferrets are liable to nip you by mistake, but never hang on. The best and quickest way to make a vicious-biting ferret leave go its hold is to roll its toes as one would a cigarette, only harder. Another plan which answers well enough in the case of a dead rabbit is to blow on the ferret's nose. The risk of distemper breaking out among dogs is considerably lessened by keeping ferrets right away from them.

From ferret-hutches to the Law Courts is a long way. I had been engaged to give expert evidence in an action for misrepresentation by the tenant of a large shoot. The plaintiff's solicitor, a complete stranger to me, while giving me a brief outline of the case, mentioned that he had a cutting of an article on the clues that help a gamekeeper, which, he thought, might help us. Being the writer of it, I thought so, too. I was introduced to another keeper engaged for the case; he was the most benevolent-looking keeper I have met. He had a way of adding, when speaking of a place, 'If you know where that is.' Cross-examined by an eminent K.C., he said he came 'from near Shrewsbury—if you know where that is.' Counsel confessed that he 'seemed to remember the name.'

I slipped five odd eggs into a partridge nest in which, apparently, there were about a dozen eggs—the next time I came that way there were forty-three. What a good thing it is that two partridges very rarely lay in one nest! There were fifty-three eggs in a wonderful co-operative nest—pheasants', fowls', English and French partridges', guinea-fowls', and turkeys'. A partridge, as a rule, is ready enough to forsake her nest if her eggs are removed; but I knew one partridge that not only persisted in laying in the nest from which I had removed her first three eggs, but also after I had destroyed the nest with my boot. So I covered the spot with a flint as big as a dinner-plate; and she laid at the side of the stone.

A keeper acquaintance told me of another persevering partridge: her nest was found, when there were only a few eggs in it, at the side of a quiet ride much used by the keepers going to and from the rearing-field. Any odd partridge eggs were placed in this nest. Twice the nest and eggs were upset by the burrowing of a mole, and twice a keeper made up a fresh nest for the eggs, which finally numbered forty-four. In spite of the interference of moles and men, the partridge stuck to her task, and, to the surprise of several people, hatched a mammoth brood. I have had many a good nest ruined by a mole, especially in dry weather; I suppose the soil beneath the nest remains comparatively moist, and so is easier to burrow in, and more likely to contain food.

There must be hundredweights of honey stored away in the dark caverns of old stumps and in hollow trees—storehouses where truant bees have garnered the sweet essence of myriads of flowers, and year after year, generation after generation, have added to their unsuspected treasure. A bricklayer who kept bees went into a wood to pick some nuts; he returned, and took sixty odd pounds of honey from an old oak-stump, within a few yards of the road. When we were rabbiting, my mate and I went over practically every yard of the woods, and we found it paid to examine every stump. The most honey we ever found in one stump was twenty-seven pounds; but most years we got a useful supply—sharing the honey, and my mate having the wax for straining the honey. Whether it was our fancy I cannot say, but we never would admit that the flavour of any honey equalled that of the wild, from the woods.

Once I gained a reward for recovering a lost dog. It was a beautiful black spaniel; part of her history never will be known, but here is the skeleton of it for three months. She was being sent by train—I forget where—at any rate, she had to change at a station where it seems she was tied up on the platform by a chain, her collar being as usual. She became frightened, slipped her collar, and away she went. Three months afterwards, knowing nothing about the spaniel, I was passing along a hedge with a spirited retriever, that was just getting useful. Suddenly there was a commotion in the hedge, out of which on the other side rushed a black spaniel. I caught sight of a trap on its near fore-paw, and gave chase. How, in the circumstances, that spaniel managed to run as she did I do not know, but she soon got a field ahead of me. So I set my retriever after her. Finally, after a run of about a mile without a check, we ran her to ground in a farmyard. She was very hostile; but I held her with a two-tined prong, fastened a cord round her neck, and removed the trap from her paw. From that moment she was as quiet as possible, and seemed pleased to allow me to carry her home, where I bathed her foot, and gave her milk and a soft bed. I never found out where she got into the trap, which evidently had been on her paw for some days. I felt certain she was the same dog I had seen unattended in a field about six weeks before, as I was cycling.

I went to the police-station to make inquiries. The superintendent looked down the list of lost dogs, and said there was none answering to the description of the spaniel. Then he referred to a book of old records; and there was the spaniel I had found—'£1 Reward.' The superintendent told me the spaniel had been lost for three months, and had been seen nine miles from where I found her. An old house-steward came to fetch her, and paid me the pound. It was worth a pound to see that old Scotchman take the little dog in his arms and say, again and again, 'Coom to daddy!' I understood that a claim for damages against the railway company failed, because it was obvious that the dog's collar had been fastened too loosely (a point worth attention when sending dogs by rail). Once a year I cycled past the house where the old fellow was employed, about fifteen miles distant, and he begged me to call and see him and the little black spaniel (which lost a toe through the trap). It was a lovely old place—enough to say that the lawn was bounded on one side by a trout-stream. I called again a year after: it was on a Sunday. 'Daddy' had been buried on the Saturday.

CHAPTER XIX

JOYS AND SORROWS

The sweetness of success—Keepers judged by their bags—Nesting—Feast-days—Illness—Unusual sights—The keeper as honorary executioner—A comparison.

THE feeling of success is a sweeter joy than a handful of tips. An old keeper had devoted his life to the improvement of his partridge-shooting; good bags had been made frequently—for instance, nine hundred brace in three days. Then came a day of more than five hundred brace. The next morning his employer asked, 'Well, H., were you satisfied with yesterday?' The keeper answered, 'Yes, m'lord.' 'So was I,' said his lordship.

Unfortunately, most keepers are judged by their bags, so they cannot be blamed for putting bag before sport. 'What sort of a day did you have at So-and-so?' is a frequent question among shooters. And nine times out of ten the answer is not, 'Most enjoyable; plenty of sporting shooting,' but rather, 'Oh, not much of a day; we only got about fifty pheasants and a few other things.' And nine times out of ten a shooter tips according to the bag. And a tip is supposed to represent his appreciation of the day's sport. I was present, in the capacity of loader, at a shoot at which three hundred pheasants were bagged. The birds (hand-reared) were beaten to the centres of some pretty coverts. Scores ran across the rides almost between one's legs, and the rest just flopped up and down. There was much exultation at the finish. I was asked how I would enjoy a day like that, and answered, 'Not much as a beater, and still less as a gun.'

Nesting was the work which I enjoyed most of all. The townsman meeting a keeper strolling about in search of eggs on a May morning may be excused his envy of the keeper's lot. If all his days were as the sweetest of May, with the birds always singing, the pheasants crowing their challenge, the turtle-doves and wood-pigeons cooing, the rich carpets of flowers spreading incense, and those olive eggs in plenty to be found—fair indeed would be the keeper's lot. But those calm days when life is so good are not best for the safety of eggs, which then are seen easier than in the dull days of blustering wind and restless herbage. Keepers speak of the hunt for eggs as 'nesting' or 'egging,' and more often of 'looking' than of searching a hedgerow or covert. Nests are not found by mere searching, but by a gift of knowing intuitively where and how to look; nor does one look for eggs direct, but for those signs which tell tales of a nest. A man who has the gift of nesting time after time will appear to come straight to a nest, apparently by luck; whereas almost unconsciously he has noted the spot where, if there is not a nest, there ought to be one.

Pheasant nests are much easier to find than partridge nests. A pheasant seldom covers up her eggs, a partridge almost always does so. To pry beneath that suspicious hollow in the dead leaves of a hedge-side is a speculation of which I never tired, any more than of that enchanting perfume of stubble, turnips, clover-heads, and partridges. It was our custom, when we went a-nesting in a party, not to smoke till the first egg was found; then the finder had the honour of standing a fill of the pipe all round.

The help given a keeper by his employer on shooting-days makes all the difference. Few keepers are blest with an employer who really understands both the art of shooting game and of bringing it to the gun. Better by far is it for the smooth and successful working of a day that an employer should understand nothing of management and know it, than that, knowing a little, he should act without understanding. The man who knows nothing, but follows instructions implicitly, is a treasure to his keeper. I call to mind a remark of a man who knew more about the silk trade than shooting. On the first of September he would say to his keeper, 'I have been your master for the last seven months; now you must be mine.'

For growls and grumbles and prodigious feasts of appetite, a keepers' and earth-stoppers' feast would take a deal of beating. The atmosphere reeks of foxes and pheasants, and beer and baccy. A certain keeper was notorious for the justice which he did to the feast. After eating an amazing quantity of all sorts of roast and boiled meat, potatoes, greens, haricot beans, dried peas, plum-pudding, cucumber, and cheese, he would say, 'Now let's have a radish just to top up with,' and then would think nothing of clearing a whole dish of the most prosperous-looking roots. This reminds me of a stopping-feast incident concerning an old fellow who was a sort of cross between a shepherd and a keeper, and wore very loud corduroy trousers on Sundays and feast-days. The dinner was over, and the usual speeches and health-drinkings were well under way, when the old chap, who had far to walk, stood up and said to the chairman, 'I thinks it be time you an' me kiss'd and said good-bye.'

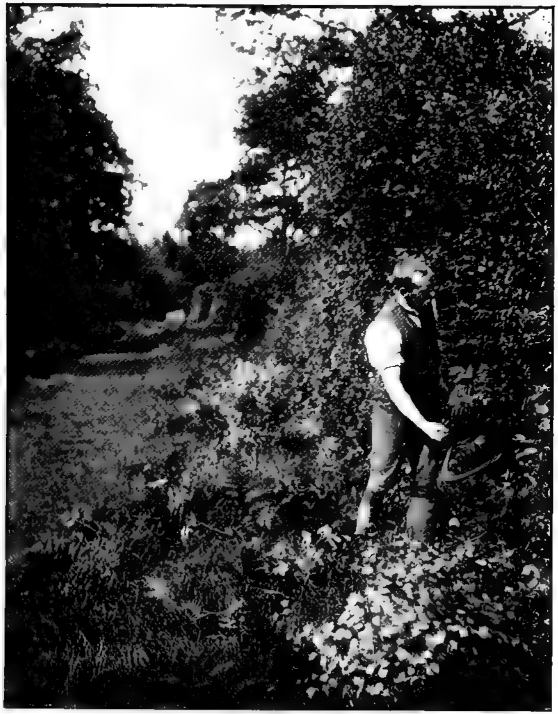
One of the greatest sorrows that can overtake a keeper is to be prevented by illness from being present at an important shoot. This happened to me only once, when I was knocked off my legs by influenza the evening before a 'combined' partridge drive; so it did not matter so much as it might have. And, luckily for my peace of mind, by the next morning I was too 'rough' to think of partridge driving or anything else. I discovered in a rather curious way that I was in the grip of jaundice. For some days I had felt a little bit out of tune internally. I went some miles to fetch a setty pheasant's nest, and, having tightened my belt, placed the eggs inside my shirt next the skin of my lower bosom, so to speak. I had a very miserable walk home, for the slight pressure of the eggs increased the discord within me. However, I was not going to risk chilling the eggs. I reached home, put the eggs safely beneath a hen—and very soon collapsed. I do not want to have jaundice again, if only for the fact that it entails an exclusive diet of milk and soda. I had about twenty-five hens sitting on the first batch of pheasant eggs. Fortunately, I was able to get an old keeper to come and lift them on and off to feed; and before they hatched I had got up steam again. Another spring I had a dose of mumps, when I was over thirty. I do not want any more. I had a cold about twice in three years, and always a chest circumference four inches greater than that of my waist. I hope it may be so always. During the last few years I seldom was entirely free from sciatica and lumbago, which occasionally would have a field-day at my expense. Since the day I left game-keeping I have not had so much as a growl from either.

A white or pied pheasant is a joy to a keeper; it is not merely a thing of interest and beauty, but a means by which the behaviour of the other pheasants can be judged. When a conspicuous pheasant strays far and wide, but returns to the home wood, then the keeper knows that the rest of his wandering birds return. Experience leads me to believe that a special appeal is not always the best way of saving a white pheasant on shooting-days. Rooks have a decided liking for a white pheasant chick on the rearing-field. An employer who suffers from chronic anti-rabbit fever scarcely can be considered a joy, and is apt to get on his keeper's nerves. Once I became so saturated with a decree that every rabbit should die that I forgot myself when I was loading at a shooting-party. I was looking for a partridge, when up jumped a rabbit, and I bowled him over before the eyes of the whole party—a gross breach of etiquette.

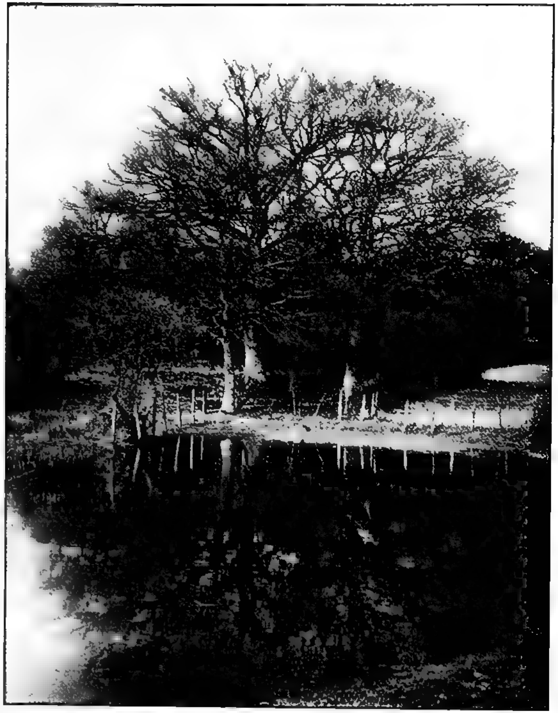
I do not suppose many people have seen a mole in the act of gathering material for its nest. I was making my way through the stuff, and happened to stop to listen to a warning 'cock-up' of a distant pheasant, when I heard a rustling quite near me. I thought it must be a mouse, and waited in the hope of seeing it. Another rustle, and I saw a dead oak-leaf move. I sank on to my knees, and crawled to the spot. Within a yard of my face I saw the pinky snout of a mole; never was more than the snout and head of the creature to be seen: its body remained in one of those shallow surface-runs. With amazing swiftness the snout felt all round, and each dry leaf within reach would be grabbed and drawn under; in about ten seconds the mole would return. When there were no more leaves within reach of one opening, the mole would thrust through the surface in a fresh place, and continue its leaf-gathering with incredible energy. I have crept beneath a wood-pigeon in a little tree, and at a distance of a few feet have watched it perform its toilet and scratch its head. And I have watched a hare come out of a wood and roll cat-fashion on a dusty cart-way. I saw soil flying from a hole some distance down a ride, crept quietly up, and caught a busy rabbit by a hind-leg. Again, I was standing waiting with my gun for an assistant to walk through a beat for rabbits, when a woodcock flew towards me, and pitched within ten feet. For fully five minutes its eye was fixed on mine. Neither of us dared to breathe naturally. Suddenly it shot itself from the ground over the hazel-stems and was gone; never have I seen anything fly so fast as that woodcock. Had I tried, I do not think I could have shot it. Curiously enough, just before the woodcock came, a rabbit had crept to the mouth of its burrow, twitched its nostrils, and retreated.

Why should a keeper be considered a sort of honorary executioner, at the beck and call of everyone? I shrank from shooting horses with the utmost loathing; yet I more or less had to shoot a good many. I always had a horror of a weak cartridge, or that the poor brute might jerk its head at the moment I pulled the trigger. Still, I would sooner shoot a horse myself than be compelled to watch someone else do it. Such repulsive jobs (they cannot be called duties) brought in nothing; the only occasion on which I was offered a fee was when a man begged me to shoot a cat. He wanted to tie the cat to a post near a saucer of milk; I could not stand that. I consented to oblige him if he would make the cat run its fastest, which he did, and offered me twopence; and because I refused to take it, he, being a baker, sent me a twopenny cake. I had to shoot one donkey, and that on a winter evening by the light of a very indifferent bicycle-lamp. Several things were a greater source of joy than the gralloching of rabbits; the aroma is so clinging.

The great quiet woods, the wide fields, the hedgerows, the dells, and the hills—these were the sweetest joys of the life, and as different from the foul discord of a town as heaven must be from hell.



Ride-trimming.



Pleasant reflections.

CHAPTER XX

CONCLUSION

Long shots--Callousness—Vermin the salt of the keeper's life—Game-keeping as a road to fortune.

THE firing of long shots is a detestable feature of modern shooting. And good shots, I am afraid, are liable to be worse offenders than others. I was speaking on this subject to the head-keeper on a famous shooting estate; with a shrug of his shoulders, he said, 'They all does it.' The abundance of game and the far from dead craze for big bags at present-day shooting-parties are indirectly the cause of an appalling callousness to the sufferings of dumb creatures. I am no believer in ultra-humanitarian ideas, but I do protest against that wantonly wilful callousness which besmirches a great sport.

The place above all I should like to go to as a keeper would be over-run with all sorts of vermin. I should enjoy myself far better than on ready-made ground where game teemed. And I dare say there are scores of keepers who would enjoy a good season at vermin as a change from a surfeit of game. Vermin supply the salt of a gamekeeper's life.

Game-keeping is by no means a short-cut to fortune. People are apt to think that because a keeper may eat free rabbits, most of his bobs-a-week are clear profit. But even a keeper cannot live on rabbits and fresh air alone, to say nothing of his wife and the usual little keepers. There are, of course, 'plummy' keepering berths. But the ordinary keeper does all that honest income will allow if he manages to maintain a wife and family respectably, pay into a club, and have a glass of beer for supper. I began at fifteen shillings a week, and ended at twenty-two; in addition, I had a free cottage and garden, four tons of coal, and some small firewood, and one suit of clothes each year; and probably I averaged rather under than over ten pounds yearly in tips, with perhaps fifty shillings in hunting fees. Many keepers nowadays lose their berths through no fault of their own, owing to so much shooting being let and frequently changing hands. Lucky indeed is the keeper who can save enough to retire on; and to retire means, as a rule, to take a public-house.

Depend upon it, there is nothing like an experience as a working keeper to give a man an appetite and rheumatism.

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