

HOW THE RABBITS WERE MANAGED.



AMONG the many pamphlets forwarded from time to time from our old home was one which was, I have heard, sent to every farmer and country gentleman in England—a translation of a famous French publication entitled, “The Art of Rearing Rabbits, and how to make a Revenue of THREE THOUSAND

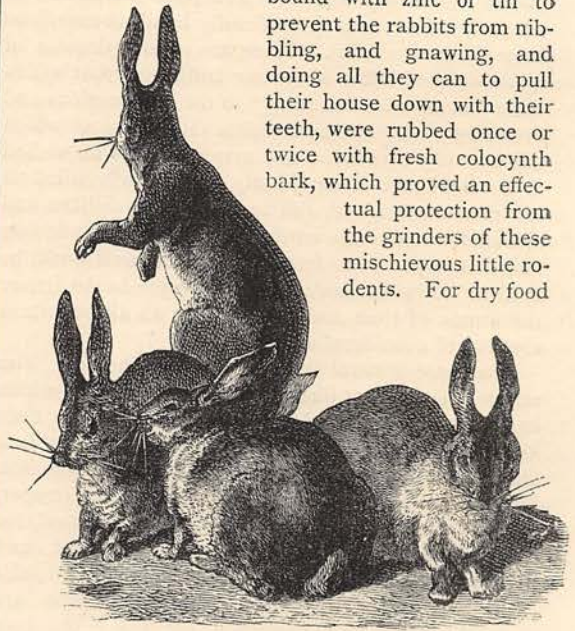
FRANCS from them.” This sounded very profitable and attractive, but of course it treated of keeping Bunny on a large scale, and as it is done in France, as an adjunct to every description of farming. Father studied it with great delight, and after a few weeks went to work after his own fashion in a corner of the quarry where there was an angle formed by the junction of our boundary wall on the west with the rock. The gardener was set to dig out a foundation five or six inches deep, extending about three yards under shelter of the wall, and a yard and a half wide. The ground sloped naturally outwards towards the front of this trench, which proved very convenient and saved trouble in draining. Some old bits of board nine or ten inches high were put in all round this foundation, and in a day or two some workmen appeared from Sinclair’s, bringing with them such a stock of sand, gravel, and lime, and such a quantity of brick rubbish, as announced that the new idea was to be carried out very much in earnest.

First of all, a lot of cement was made by mixing three parts of clean gravel, three parts of fine sand, and one of lime with water till it was of about the thickness of ordinary mortar. This was spread all over the excavation, and up as high as the boards, still preserving the fall of the ground, and forming a channel in front, four or five inches from the edge. This was firmly trodden down and smoothed off with a piece of plank used edgewise, and by the next day was as hard as stone. It was then spread over with an inch or so of Roman cement and sand, through which we were told it was impossible for any damp to permeate. Some posts had previously been driven in at the corners, and at regular intervals beyond but close to the cement, and a door and two glazed windows were arranged for, and then to our astonishment a double row of old boards was roughly nailed up on the inside and outside of the posts, leaving a hollow space between them. This looked like very rough work compared with the preceding preparations, but we soon saw that the vacancy was filled with small bits of broken brick, tile, and stone rubbish; and cement, made much thinner than it had been for the floor, was

poured in with it. When the boarding was taken away, there was a good strong wall three feet high, which received a coating of Roman cement and was ultimately lime-washed. The roof was a lean-to made of boards, asphalted, tarred and sanded, with two flaps which opened and closed at pleasure. This kind of covering was chosen in preference to slates or tiles, because it had the advantage of being warm in winter and cool in summer. The two windows opened inwards, and were covered outside with wire netting to keep out cats and other marauders.

Father said that he had seen very capital hutches made of old casks turned over on their sides, and had a great mind to adopt them; but as he had carpenters on the spot, and plenty of wood about, some proper hutches were constructed in the shape of double dwellings, containing a down-stairs apartment for the buck, and an up-stairs one, with a neat little retiring-room partitioned off, for the doe. This small division had a wooden door of its own, which made the interior quite dark, and an arched opening into the larger chamber, the front of which, as well as of the lower part, was all one large wire-work door. There was a little gutter at the back of each, by which the drainage was conducted into the open channel in the floor below. Both parts of the hutch were furnished with a miniature manger or hay-rack, and the edges, which are usually

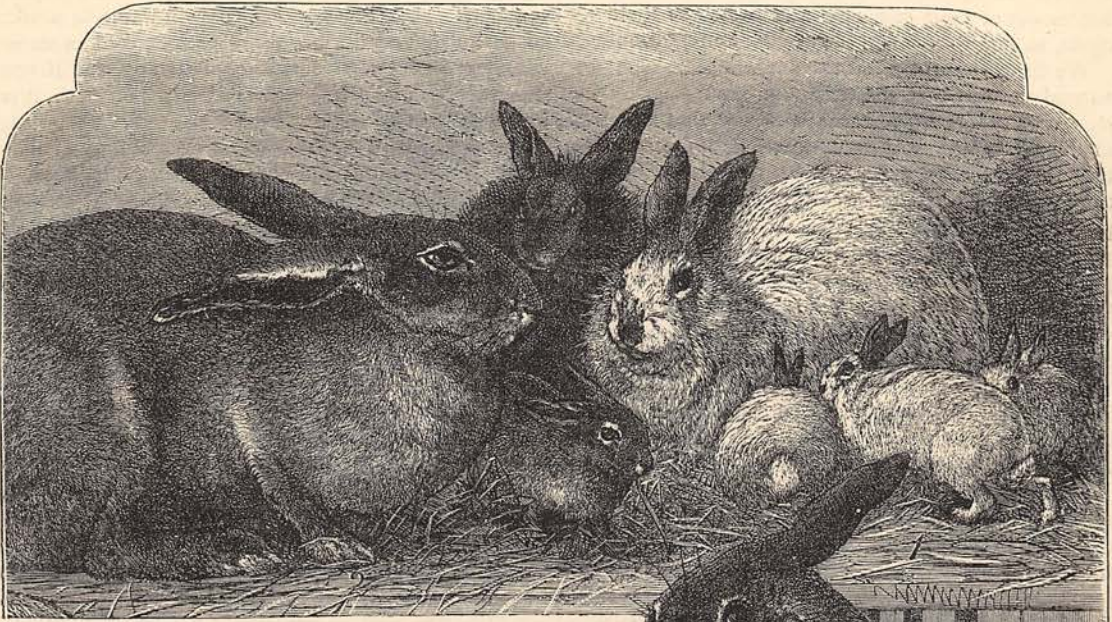
bound with zinc or tin to prevent the rabbits from nibbling, and gnawing, and doing all they can to pull their house down with their teeth, were rubbed once or twice with fresh colocynth bark, which proved an effectual protection from the grinders of these mischievous little rodents. For dry food



AT PLAY.

they had small troughs lined with zinc, and earthenware drinking-vessels filled with clean water, and only put into the hutches for a short time daily.

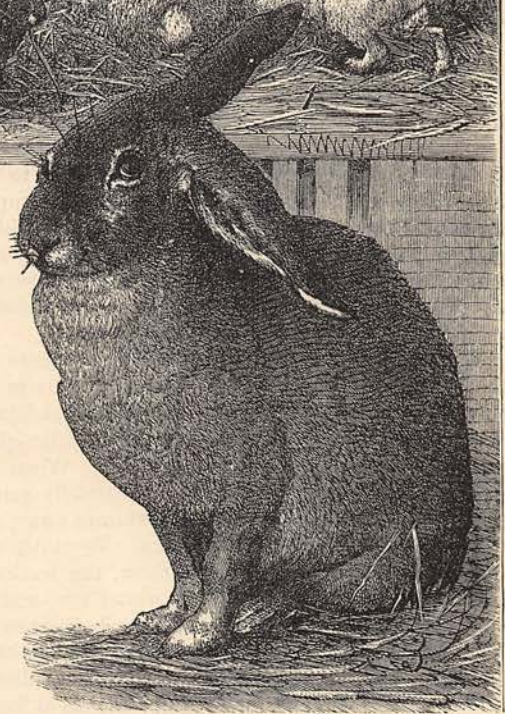
The first rabbits father bought were Chinchillas, or



A FAMILY PARTY.

Silver-greys, which had then only recently been introduced into England, and were much more expensive than they are now, though I never heard exactly what he gave for them. I do know, however, that when he had a good many to dispose of, they were always killed and skinned, the carcasses being sold by the pound, and the beautiful skins for a sovereign, and even sometimes for twenty-four shillings, a dozen. The fur of this particular kind of rabbit is exported very largely to Russia and China, where it is made up in imitation of silver-fox and sea-otter.

He had at various times several Dutch does, which, though very small, were remarkably good nurses, and particularly useful in bringing up some of the young fancy rabbits as well as their own. Then there were some Andalusians, noted for their size and strength, the first pair of which he imported from Paris, and gave for them the unheard-of sum of £6 10s.; and a friend of ours gave no less than £5 for a single large doe of the same breed which came over with them. When I tell you, however, that these handsome foreigners were exceedingly prolific, proof against every malady that ordinary rabbit-flesh is heir to, that full-grown ones weighed as much as sixteen pounds each, and the young ones at eight or nine weeks old were as fat and heavy as those of the ordinary kinds at nine months, you will agree with me that they were worth the money in the long run. Angoras were eschewed on account of their delicacy, but their place was more than supplied by the Polish, or, as they are frequently called, Himalayan Black-nosed rabbits, which have red eyes, and fine, white, lustrous-looking coats, and ears, feet, and tail mouse-coloured when young, but dark brown or black when arrived at maturity. They always proved very hardy, and their fur, which is the best imitation of ermine known, is much prized. The skins sold, according to size, at from 1s. 6d. to 2s. 6d. each.



Father never would keep any does that were not gentle and tame, though he liked to see the bucks bold and brave and full of spirit. When Mrs. Bunny expected her little family she was always supplied with fresh straw, with which she made herself a nest in the interior compartment, putting a soft, warm lining to it, of her own fur.

While engaged in this manner, a piece of old blanket was hung over the hutch as a signal to all corners that the inmate must be left undisturbed, though she was regularly fed. Rabbits are in the habit of closing up the nest in which their little ones are, and sitting by it with the greatest solicitude, and they suckle their offspring principally in the night. Father would never allow us to peep and pry about them while they were very young, because, he said, if the mother was in any

way worried she would be likely to drag some of her babies out of their cosy nest and not cover them up again, so that they would die of cold and neglect.

We hear sometimes of rabbits who are such unnatural parents that they kill and even devour their own children; but father used to say that this was almost always in consequence of the universal idea that they do not require anything to drink. When the juveniles were about a fortnight old, the movable partition dividing the mother's hutch into two compartments used to be withdrawn, so as to give them plenty of room to gambol about and enjoy themselves together; and at six weeks of age they were always removed into clean, warm, spacious hutches with plenty of straw, and fed four times a day on barley-meal, with cow-parsley, pimpernel, cabbage-leaves, and any potatoes left from dinner between whiles. If they left any of these nice things, the remnants were given to the elders, who disposed of the scraps immediately.

Bunny is a creature which has its own natural times for being hungry, and is at these hours awake and on the alert, sniffing about, following those who go near it with its eyes, and in fact almost asking for its food. Daybreak is the first of these meal-times, when it dearly likes a good breakfast; from eleven to one it is ready for dinner, and very anxious for supper about an hour before sunset; but no more should be given at any of these repasts than is likely to be eaten; and the old saying, that we ought always to rise from table with an appetite, is as applicable to rabbits as to human beings.

We children were often very busy in the lanes and fields, getting green-meat for our father's pets in the shape of marsh-mallows, sow-thistles, dandelions, wild thyme, pimpernel or shepherd's weather-glass, and the above-mentioned cow-parsley. When the garden was weeded, the plants were carefully sorted, poppies and the common mustard thrown away, and everything else saved for the rabbits. Vegetable cuttings of all kinds were kept for them, the haulm of beans and peas stored for their winter use, and we sometimes made an excursion with our baskets to the Legh woods in autumn, where we not only gathered hazel-nuts and blackberries for ourselves, but collected acorns and beech-nuts for the furry friends at home. Fennel, aniseed, coriander, and green peppermint were regarded as tonics, and used to flavour and season other food, much as we add pepper and mustard to ours.

The great aim in feeding rabbits is to give them as much nourishment as possible in the smallest bulk, and therefore the finer qualities of meal, such as

barley-meal, oatmeal, and middlings are the cheapest and best. They must be mixed with water to a stiff mash, and given warm. Grey peas soaked in water till they sprout are remarkably fattening, and if one handful a day be given, and two messes of mash, it is astonishing how soon a rabbit is ready for market. Bran and pollard are very much bought for this purpose; but, though low-priced, they do not contain half so much nourishment as meal, and of course the object of fattening cannot be so soon attained. A little salt should be mixed with the food twice a week or so.

A great deal of discrimination was necessary in giving the green fodder. If they had had it when damp with dew or rain it would have produced diarrhoea, so in wet seasons the plants were always gathered the day before they were wanted, and spread out somewhere under cover to dry, or sometimes mixed with a little hay, which helped to absorb the damp, besides being a pleasant change and addition to the food. If any of the rabbits seemed at all languid, as would sometimes be the case with a doe after bringing up a large family, cook was directed to boil or simmer some linseed for two hours very slowly; this was mixed with their meal, and rapidly restored them to condition, as well as imparting a very sleek, glossy appearance to their coats. If they refuse their food at any time, it is from loss of appetite caused by cold or derangement of the digestive organs, and the best as well as quickest way of curing them is by giving a slice of bread dipped in warm milk, not more than the bread will soak up, and not too hot. This, with a nice warm berth and good bed of hay, will soon restore their appetite for ordinary food.

Since oil-cake has been so much used for fattening cattle, some persons have resorted to it for rabbits, but the poor things have to be starved into taking it, and it has to be pounded and mixed with other things at first, until they get accustomed to the unnatural flavour. We used to put the young ones up for fattening at about four months old, and chose as many bucks as possible, as does were more profitable to keep. In fine dry weather a little green food was often spread on the gravel outside the house, and they would come out and take it, but run back again as soon as any one approached. The experiment was once tried of fattening a youthful Andalusian entirely on clover hay, with as much milk sweetened with sugar as it liked to drink. It attained the weight of sixteen pounds very rapidly, but showed no superiority to others of its kind fed in the usual way; so there was no reason for adopting this course in preference to the old one.

ELIZA CLARKE.

