

THE RABBIT PEST IN AUSTRALASIA.

BY C. F. GORDON-CUMMING.



BEHOLD how great a matter a little fire kindleth!"

Who could have foreseen, when about a quarter of a century ago the first rabbits were imported to South Australia, as delicacies for the table, that to-day their extermination would form one of the most serious problems for the Legislature?

New Zealand did not receive this gift till some years later, when it unfortunately occurred to a colonist

in the Southern Isle to turn adrift some rabbits on the bleak sand-hills along the coast at Invercargill. Accordingly he imported a little family of seven from the old country, and very soon he and his friends were able to indulge in some pleasant shooting, and found a change from constant mutton very satisfactory.

But they soon found that their sport could not keep pace with the increase of the rabbits. Soon every blade of grass was consumed, and then the hungry creatures nibbled the roots which bound the light sand-hills and prevented them from blowing over the arable land.

The farmers began shooting and trapping with all their might, but the rabbits had now been introduced to Otago, whence they spread in every direction, defying all efforts of the widely-scattered settlers, who for the most part live eight or ten miles apart, half a dozen men sufficing to herd flocks which range over perhaps 50,000 acres.

As it was obvious that these could in nowise check the ever-increasing evil, it became necessary to hire men to trap, shoot, and ferret professionally. These trappers required the aid of large packs of dogs, and it was soon found that the disturbance thus caused among the flocks resulted in greater mischief than even the ravages of the rabbits. Moreover, the trappers were paid at the rate of twopence a skin, but the market became so over-stocked that skins sold for less than they cost.

When you consider that the rabbit begins to breed at the early age of six months, and thenceforth has about six litters a year, of from six to eight young, it is evident that the increase of the species must necessarily be excessive. It has been reckoned that one ancestral couple, having attained to the age of four and a half years, may very well see around them a prosperous clan of descendants, numbering upwards of 1,270,000.

Among the many efforts made to subdue the rabbit pest, none has more signally failed than the introduction of cats, which, from the days of the Marquis of Carrabas to the present time, have proved such successful rabbiters when working on their own account. In New Zealand, however (where so many things go by contraries), they seem to object to sport, and to prefer a purely domestic life.

In Victoria it was at first hoped that the native cat, which is a kind of weasel, would have proved a useful ally; but, strange to say, it at once fraternised with the rabbits, and now these singular friends are said to share the same burrows.

All manner of remedies have been tried, and successively given up as useless in the face of so widespread an evil. The extent of the ravages could scarcely be credited were it not for the clear statistics of the Rabbit Nuisance Committee.

Thus, in South Canterbury, New Zealand, Messrs. Cargill and Anderson state that in the previous year they had killed 500,000 rabbits by poison, and in the following spring their sheep-run was just as densely peopled by them as ever.

Mr. Kitchen says that he kept nearly a hundred men working as rabbit-killers for four months, and actually cleared his land. Very soon, however, newcomers arrived, and entered into possession of this vacant tract, and now they are worse than ever.

Still the plague spreads, and the whole land is more or less infested with the pest, and many districts are reduced to mere warrens, on which it is impossible to feed sheep at all. Many sheep-farmers have been forced to abandon runs of from 15,000 to 16,000 acres. Mr. R. Campbell has been compelled to abandon *two hundred and fifty thousand acres!* In one year he expended £3,000 in the endeavours to clear about half this land. Mr. Rees reports having killed 180,000 rabbits within twelve months.

In 1878 the total number of sheep in New Zealand was upwards of 13,000,000, but so terrible have been the ravages of this "feeble people," that the official returns for 1880 and 1881 show a diminution of 2,000,000 in the number of sheep, and the last quarter of 1881 shows a falling off of ten per cent. in the export of wool as compared with the previous year.

As a slight compensation, but one not approaching to the loss, it is found that the value of rabbit-skins exported in the same period shows an increase of £36,000, the number of skins exported averaging 10,000,000 a year, while 100,000 rabbits were exported to England by the New Zealand Meat Preserving Company, which has found the experiment so popular that it now announces its readiness to receive 10,000 rabbits a day to be preserved for the foreign market.

Whether this last expedient for utilising the foe is altogether safe, it were hard to tell. I confess that,

for my own part, I should seriously object to eating New Zealand rabbits, considering that the cure now in vogue is wholesale poisoning by means of grain saturated with phosphorus. (Perhaps phosphorus in this form may prove beneficial to human beings, but one would like some certain information on this point.)

How the sheep can be prevented from eating the poisoned grain is to me a mystery. It seems, however, to be practicable, and the sheep-owners are now beginning to take heart again.

How one man's poison may be another man's meat has been abundantly shown in Australia, where several enterprising colonists have established rabbit-preserving factories on so large a scale that they may well be described as rabbit-exterminators. In Western Victoria there are two such factories—one at Colac, and another at Camperdown. The returns of the former for one week were 18,000 pairs of rabbits, while in the same time the latter received 10,000. Thus nearly 60,000 rabbits were disposed of in one week by these two establishments, and one carter alone received from the Colac factory a cheque for £128 16s. 8d. for six days' work. This establishment employs about 300 hands in out-door work and about ninety in-doors. Camperdown gives work to as many more. The trappers employed by these two firms range over an area of ground about seventy miles in length by

twenty in width. Yet this only covers one little spot of the vast region where the irrepressible rabbits mock at the combined wisdom of all the legislative powers.

A very important ally has, however, now been secured, and great hopes are entertained that it may prove a more successful rabbit-destroyer than any hitherto thought of. This is the Indian mongoose (*Herpestes griseus*), which in the last ten years has done such good service in Jamaica as a wholesale rat-killer. The rats, attracted by the sugar-fields, had increased in such multitudes as to threaten the desolation of that fertile isle. It occurred to one of the planters to introduce this notorious ratter, and the results have surpassed his highest hopes. These active little creatures, resembling large ferrets, multiplied with extraordinary velocity, and waged a deadly war of extermination against the rats.

It is hoped that they may prove equally efficacious in the destruction of rabbits, so the New Zealand and Australian Governments have applied to the Government of India for a supply of mongooses. These are accordingly being collected in Bengal and sent to the Zoological Gardens at Calcutta, whence, when a hundred couples have been secured, they will be despatched to their new homes, where we may well wish them success.

THE WAY SOME FOLKS LIVE : THE LONDON ORGAN-GRINDER.



HERE is no more familiar figure in the streets of London and its suburbs than the peripatetic organ-grinder. The old hurdy-gurdy is, it is true, to a great extent a thing of the past, but in its stead we have a multitude of piano-organs, which are to be seen in almost too plentiful abundance north, south, east, and west of us. So numerous

indeed are they, that it is difficult to believe that so many people can earn a livelihood in this way. The musical tastes of the masses are certainly catered for on a sufficiently extensive scale; and it says much for their prosperity that a whole army of itinerant musicians are content to rely for a living upon their gratuitous liberality. So far as the organ-grinders are concerned, however, other influences than the mere love of music are at work. For instance, most of them are foreigners, and the English people are very generous to those natives of other countries who are

led hither by accident or choice. Numerous as are the organ-grinders of London, there is probably no class of men of whose manner of life and social and moral condition less is known. Living much to themselves, and resenting inquisitive intrusion, they preserve their nationality in the heart of the English capital.

It is only necessary to visit the organ-grinders' quarter to appreciate this very fully. There is scarcely a district to be found in the whole of London which is more suggestive of commercial prosperity than the Clerkenwell Road at the point where it crosses Farringdon Street. On all sides rise towering warehouses and massive buildings, which suggest the magnificent proportions of the businesses which need to be so finely housed.

A few yards on the north side of the Clerkenwell Road, however, a very different sight is to be seen. If you descend one of the narrow hilly streets, for all the world like those little back streets leading to the quay which are to be found in every old English sea-port, you will find yourself transferred, as if by magic, into a strangely unfamiliar region. It is not the houses that will seem so unusual. They are small enough, it is true, since they are obviously intended for human habitation; and the forlorn appearance of broken window-panes always suggests that a glazier might find plenty to do at a low price. The streets and alleys, too, are narrow—sometimes so narrow that