



By GRANT ALLEN.

A RABBIT OF THE WORLD.

A LITERARY Lady, sentimental as was the wont of literary ladies before the incarnation of the New Woman, went once to call on a Great Poet, who pervaded these regions. But the Great Poet was coy, says the legend, and listened not to the voice of the Literary Lady, charmed she never so wisely. He refused to be drawn by her cunning blandishments, but smoked on in peace, glaring gruffly from his chimney corner. So at last the Great Poet's wife, feeling that the situation grew slightly strained, endeavoured to create a diversion by saying, "My dear, won't you take Mrs. Gusherville to see the garden?" The Great Poet, thus checkmated, rose unwillingly from his seat, and strode three paces ahead through the shrubbery paths, followed, *longo intervallo*, by the panting Mrs. Gusherville. Never a word did he say as he paced the lawn with his heavy tread; but at last, as he approached one garden border, he turned towards his visitor. Speech trembled on his lips; Mrs. Gusherville leant forward to catch the immortal accents. The Poet spoke. "D—mn those rabbits!" he said; and then relapsed into silence. That was all Mrs. Gusherville got out of her interview.

I am reminded of this episode, which if not true to fact is at any rate true to human nature, by the short sharp barking of Fan, my neighbour's spaniel, resounding from the heather in the direction of the Frying Pan. Each bark is an eager

impatient snap, and its burden is—"Rabbits!" Now I sympathise with every living thing that breathes; yet if it were not for a constitutional objection to unnecessary vigour of language, I could almost back Fan, and echo the Great Poet's indignant exclamation. For whatever we try to plant among the heather, by way of beautifying our small patch of moorland (as who should paint the lily or gild refined gold), those unscrupulous rodents immediately proceed to treat as their private property. Not one of our white brooms has survived their attacks; and the way they have devoured our periwinkles and our St. John's wort is a credit to their appetites, and a testimonial to the magnificent air of this healthy neighbourhood. The lad who attends to my garden (we call it a garden by courtesy, not to hurt its feelings) is always saying to me, "Let me set a trap for 'em, sir." But grave as their misdemeanours are, I can't bear to trap them. I remember that after all they were the earliest inhabitants. They dwelt here before me; and when I plumped down my cottage in the midst of their moor, I seriously interfered with their domestic economy. "There's a horrid house built," said the mother rabbit: "I suspect a dog will follow, and perhaps a gun too." "Never mind," said the father, who was a rabbit of the world; "they'll more than make it up to us, I predict, by planting greenstuff, which is a deal jucier, after all, than gorse or bracken."

• The Danger Signal •



© ECI

DIN
94

D. H. Smith

And indeed, I feel I owe a duty to these earlier inhabitants ; I love their fellowship, and do what I can to encourage their uninterrupted residence. The night-jar still perches nightly on one accustomed branch of the big lone fir-tree ; the cuckoo comes and calls to us from the clump of stunted pines by the dining-room window ; the merry brown hares dart obliquely across the ill-grown green patch of tennis lawn ; and the baby bunnies themselves, all unconscious of their misdemeanours against the growing shrubs, brush their faces before our eyes with their tiny gray paws as we sit upon the terrace. My neighbour has a shot at them with gun and dog ; and even as I write, I can hear the *ping, ping*, of his murderous cartridges and the quick cries of Fan in the adjoining plot of moor ; but for myself I refrain. I would rather have the gambolling of such innocent fellow-creatures on my patch of grass in the dusk of evening than all the rhododendrons and azaleas and cypresses the florist can palm upon me.

And how pretty they are, those harmless little malefactors ! How they frolic across the sward with tiny irregular jumps, like a sportive kitten, only ten times more guileless—no tinge of blood-thirstiness in their liquid eye, no stealthy cruelty in their honest gray faces ! Your rabbit is a decent and inoffensive vegetarian. Besides, its mode of life sorts well with the uplands ; it never disfigures nature, but accommodates itself to the environment like a good working evolutionist. When we first thought of building here, a clever Girton girl, whom we met at the little inn, held up her hands in horror, “Why *build* on Hartmoor at all ? Why not simply burrow ?” And the rabbits burrow. The hilltop is just honey-combed with their underground palaces. There they lurk for the most part during the heat of the day, and come out at night to feed on the furze-bushes that protect and conceal the mouths of their burrows. Indeed, the very shape of the furze-bush, as we ordinarily know it, depends on the constant activity of the hungry and greedy bunnies. Naturally, gorse, if left to itself, would grow feathery from the soil upward, without any gaunt stretch of naked stem at its base ; but the rabbits eat off the growing shoots just as high as they can reach by standing tip-toe on their hind feet ; so that the resulting shape is a product, so to speak, of rabbit

into gorse-bush. Where the soil is light and sandy, as here, burrowing is universal ; but on cold wet moors, the rabbits avoid the chance of rheumatism by constructing long tunnels above ground instead, through matted galleries of heather and herbage.

Cowardice is the principal defence of the rabbit, as of all other unarmed rodents. At the first alarm, he flies headlong to his burrow. What swiftness of foot does for the open-nesting hare, that swiftness of retreat does for his underground cousin. Natural selection in such a case favours the most cowardly ; for to be brave is to court immediate extinction. That is why rabbits have the noticeable patch of white under their tails—their scuts, as sportsmen very aptly call them. At first sight you would suppose such a conspicuous white mark must be a source of danger. In reality it has been evolved as a patent safety signal. For while the rabbits crouch and feed, unseen in the gray grass, they are very little conspicuous ; but the moment one of them spies any cause of alarm, off it scampers to its hole ; and, raising the danger-signal as it goes, it warns the whole warren, all whose members scuttle after it apace without waiting to inquire into the nature of the panic. The mouth of the burrow runs quite straight just at first, so that the retreating bunny can dash into it at full speed without checking his pace ; but at a convenient point, a few feet in, it begins to bend and divaricate, besides branching and subdividing as a precaution against weasels and other vermin enemies. It has also at least two entrances and exits, like a room at the theatre, in case of pursuit ; and it is cunningly engineered against the chance of intrusion. But the nursing chamber, where the timid wee mother hides her naked and shapeless young, is quite differently contrived with but a single mouth, and is fitted up with every internal luxury. The good parent lines it with soft fur pulled from her own warm coat, and goes stealthily by night to suckle her little ones. When she comes away, she plasters up the entrance with earth to conceal it as well as she can from prying enemies ; and there the baby rabbits remain alone in the dark till her next visit. Three or four such broods are produced each year, for your rabbit is indeed an uxorious creature.