

Truffle-Hunting with Pigs and Dogs.

BY M. DINORBEN GRIFFITH.



THE word "hunting" appeals to Englishmen all the world over. The game may be big or small, anything from a fox to an elephant, it matters little if it affords good sport.

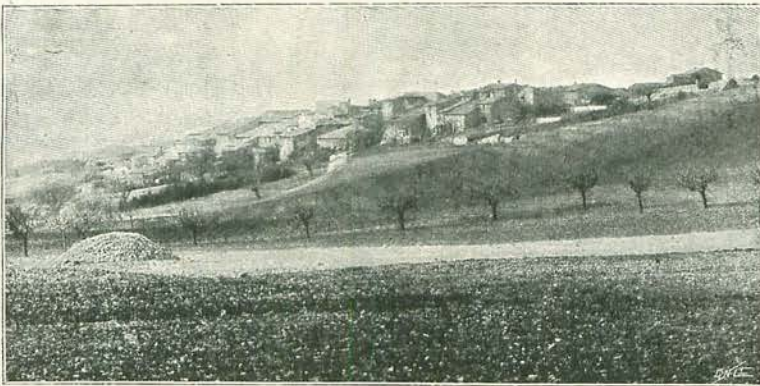
Probably but few, if any, of our readers have taken part in, or witnessed, a truffle hunt, a novel and somewhat amusing sport, possessing many advantages. It can be indulged in by rich and poor, man, woman, or child, without danger to life or limb—so far from this being the case, it is invigorating and healthful, and has the additional advantage of being at times extremely profitable.

Then we came across a pile of hampers, packed and labelled ready for dispatch by rail, around which a still stronger odour lingered, so at last we asked the man in charge of them what they contained.

"Truffles," was the reply.

Now we knew and would never forget the smell of this delicacy. We learnt that a truffle market had been held that morning, beginning at seven, and that it was then over. "But many of the big buyers do their business over there at the Café de Commerce, giving their orders to well-known truffle farmers without seeing samples," continued our kind informant.

We remembered that our real errand in



From a]

BEDOIN, THE CENTRE OF THE TRUFFLE INDUSTRY.

[Photograph.

The best truffle-hunting centre in France is the Department of the Vaucluse, where the annual find averages 900,000lb. During the last hunting season—which commences in November and ends in March—we visited the Vaucluse, choosing the picturesque old town of Carpentras as our head-quarters, it being also the principal truffle market.

We arrived there on a market day. It was a busy scene, the streets crowded with carts, people, and goods for sale. The air was heavy with an indescribable perfume, which became fainter or stronger as we moved along. Now and again a man or woman would pass us, balancing on their heads several empty crates or baskets, and that odour became for the moment more pungent.

the market was to meet a truffle farmer who had promised to initiate us into the mysteries of truffle-hunting, and the café seemed to be the most likely place to find him. It was evidently a favourite resort, for not only was every room full, but the pavement was so crowded that it was only with great difficulty we could elbow our way through. The babel of bargaining, of greeting, and the shouting of orders for coffee and other beverages was deafening, reminding one of the Paris Bourse or the Stock Exchange in London. A panting waiter captured our farmer for us, after we had exhausted ourselves in the attempt, and we arranged to drive over to his place early on the following morning.

"What is the meaning of all this noise and excitement?" we inquired.

"This is a particularly important market," was the reply, "and it is at this café that wine growers meet to bargain for vine roots; as it is now the planting season. A great business is done in truffles here also."

Next morning saw us on our way to a truffle hunt; our destination was Bedoin, one of the many picturesque villages that nestle at the foot of snow-capped Mount Ventoux, about ten miles distant from Carpentras. The inhabitants of these villages all collect truffles, and during the season, as soon as it is light, there is a perfect exodus of men, women, children, pigs, and dogs.

her lunch of dry bread and home-made wine, while her *porc* rested at her feet.

On our arrival at Bedoin we were most kindly received by our farmer and his sister, whose bearing and manners were those of a *grande dame*. This was not surprising, for she and her brother were descended from a noble Greek family, Patras de Raxis, our host being the Comte de Flassan, and his uncle a colonel in the Papal Guard. While our farmer hurried off to prepare for the expedition his sister busied herself in providing us with hot coffee and charcoal stoves for our feet. "You are favoured with just



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A PIG AT WORK.

[Photograph.

They keep together until they reach the neighbourhood of the truffle grounds; then the little parties separate, for pigs do not hunt well in packs.

Slowly you see them climbing up Mount Ventoux, whose sides, up to within about twelve yards of the summit, look as if they had been ploughed, this being the handiwork of the truffle-hunting pig. Now and again a solitary figure might be seen sharply silhouetted against the blue sky. We passed good-looking young men in blouses and bérêts, each accompanied by a dog and carrying truffle bags and hoes. A comely woman, seated by the wayside, was enjoying

the right weather," she remarked, "and will have good sport, for the scent does not lie every day, you know."

Just then we received the summons to start, and joined our host, who, stick in hand and carrying two bags, one empty for the truffles, the other containing acorns—the use of which will be explained later—led the way with a pig, a matronly-looking animal, long, lanky, and bad-tempered, that with considerable difficulty had been roused from her morning siesta. The lady resented having to go out, and consequently was as disagreeable and contrary as a pig can be.

Our march was long and very tedious, for

the pig would not hurry, and the air was keen; often had the wretched animal to be reminded with the stick that she was out for work and not for pleasure; but the lady only grunted and grumbled, and occasionally stopped still to admire the scenery or to think. At last we reached the hunting ground, a plantation of small but bushy oak trees planted at regular intervals, the ground surrounding them being very stony.

The pig sulked no more, but with many a wag of her tightly curled tail and grunts of satisfaction made for the plantation, selected a tree and began digging. With her snout she quickly made a large hole, scatter-

until the bag was nearly full. The unearthing of every truffle was rewarded with two or three acorns.

From oak to oak the pig wandered and we followed, every digging resulting in a find.

"This is an artificial *truffière*," said our farmer. "Now we will go farther into the mountain, when you will see other pigs at work, on the natural ground, and dogs too; but the dogs only point, and we have to dig for the fruit."

"What kind are the dogs?"

"Basset hounds principally, and we also use a sheep-dog of a peculiar breed."



THE TWO METHODS OF TRUFFLE-HUNTING—THE MEN ON THE LEFT ARE EMPLOYING A DOG; THE ONE ON THE RIGHT A PIG.
From a Photograph.

ing earth and stones right and left. The farmer, who is intently watching the operation, stoops down quickly, gives the animal a tap on the snout, and puts a few acorns before her, then fishes out of the hole a potato-like bulb nearly the size of a hen's egg, deep purple in colour and covered with little warts; inside it is grey, veined with white, like marble. This we were informed was a good specimen of valuable black truffle, of good shape, firm, and of exquisite odour. It must be understood there are truffles and truffles, patrician and plebeian, with many grades in between, but those of the Vaucluse are the *crème de la crème* of truffles.

The pig continued mining, and opened out a trench that proved a rich find and kept us hard at work picking up truffles

We came across many women with pigs on the mountain side, and they all agreed it was a record day, and their bags were fairly full. Old men and women usually hunt with pigs, but young men prefer the dogs and the trouble of digging. The process of finding the truffles was exactly the same on the mountain as on the artificial farms, but the area was greater, and the results less satisfactory.

Pigs are passionately fond of truffles, and the acorns are a "sop to Cerberus" to prevent them from eating their find, as we saw when, attracting the attention of the farmer for a moment, the pig dug out a truffle and ate it with a grin of self-satisfaction that was inimitable.

Young pigs begin their education in truffle-hunting when a month old; they accompany

their mothers, and are initiated into all its mysteries. Some are so well trained that they will dig, find the truffle, seize it with their teeth and throw it on one side; but these educated pigs are more often met with on artificial farms.

Every French pig takes kindly to this kind of work, and can keep on at it for a long day with no refreshment, except a good meal before starting in the morning and the three or four acorns which are given as a reward for every find. The dogs go more quickly, and are easier to manage and lead.

"You must notice," said our farmer, "that truffles can only be found within the circle shaded by the branches of the trees, and

every nook is explored. Yet the demand is well ahead of the supply. To take a medium year the sale of truffles in the *Place* of Carpentras, from December to March, amounted to two million francs—that is without counting those supplied to hotels and for private consumption, nor those sold in the little country markets. Thus it will be seen that this industry is a very important factor in the prosperity of the country.

On our remarking that it seemed a pity for such large tracts of ground to be useless for so many months in the year, the reply was: "But truffles are not our only harvest; before their season commences we gather hundreds of kilogrammes of mushrooms;



From a]

A PIG "FINDS"—THE HUNTER WAITING TO SEIZE THE TRUFFLE.

[Photograph.

those nearest the trunks are always the largest. When we cut the branches we find no truffles until they have grown again to their old dimensions."

The value of the "*Diamant de la cuisine*," as a French wit and gourmet calls the truffle, has wonderfully increased during the last forty years. They were sold before that period in the market at Carpentras for from four to five francs the two pounds; now the price ranges from twenty to forty francs for the same quantity. The increase in price has naturally given a great impetus to the truffle-collecting industry. In former years thousands were left to rot in the ground, now every villager collects, and

they are very large and of most delicate flavour." It seemed almost incredible that they could grow in such ground and force their way up between the stones.

Mushroom-gathering and truffle-hunting are also varied by edible-snail collecting. These are found in great quantities in holes in the walls, or in hollow trees, and are a greatly appreciated dainty. They can be purchased, ready prepared, at any pork butcher's. Snails and truffles, in one form or another, will be found on the menu of every hotel in the Vaucluse.

Certain kinds of truffles are found in England, but they are of very inferior quality; but on account of being much

cheaper than the black truffles they can be bought at from 2s. to 3s. a pound. They are often preserved and sold as French truffles. These are gathered in the summer, and are found almost on the surface of the ground. In Epping Forest false truffles grow in large quantities above the ground. These are collected and sold to the small foreign restaurants. The odour is very strong and disagreeable.

We learned that the black truffles are not sold much in England, as they are too expensive, and gastronomy has not been sufficiently studied to enable the general public to distinguish and appreciate the difference between the delicious black truffle and the common and cheaper red, grey, or white ones. We hardly ever see the black truffles in their fresh state, as they will only keep good for eight days, so they are usually preserved in tins for export.

We saw little baskets containing about two pounds of fresh truffles, of the retail value of £3, being dispatched to Belgium, Germany, and to Paris, the latter alone consuming from seven to eight million francs' worth every year. It is in the Paris market that the retail price of the truffles is fixed. The yearly increasing demand for this appetizing dainty inspired an enterprising citizen of Carpentras to experiment on cultivating it artificially. At this time—that is about fifty years ago—truffles were of no interest to anyone except to those who collected or sold them; but the results of M. Rousseau's experiment produced a great sensation, for they meant the future of the country. Commissions were appointed to visit and report on the artificial *truffières* and the system of the originator. Agriculturists and naturalists woke up to the fact that no one knew much about truffles, nor how they were produced, and the question became the topic of the day. Scientists argued and quarrelled, but could come to no definite agreement on the subject. M. Rousseau cared little for the scientific side of the truffles, but he demonstrated in a practical manner that he could grow them, and anyone was welcome to know how.

He had one day made a great discovery when journeying in the country a little outside Carpentras, and that was that truffles only grew under certain species of oaks. The idea occurred to him of picking the acorns off those trees and sowing them. It is said that the power of producing truffles is hereditary and can be transmitted from tree to tree, that trees grown from acorns

gathered from a truffle-oak will produce truffles, and of the same kind as those from the parent tree. The idea of starting an artificial *truffière* by such means was much ridiculed.

"Why," one truffle merchant said, "a truffle is like a potato, and can be grown in the same way if cut up and planted in properly prepared ground; this I will prove, as I am going to do it."

He did, but no truffles have appeared from that day to this.

M. Rousseau stood firm as the apostle of his own creed. He owned a plot of ground that was not favourable for grain, and never returned him more than £1 per acre.

He sowed the acorns in November close together in furrows about six yards apart and running from north to south. Essential conditions for the production of good truffles are a moderate warmth, not too much humidity nor too great dryness. Condition necessary for the cultivator—patience—for he could not hope to see any results for from six to ten years. The best truffles are only found from the seventh year.

The object of sowing the acorns so closely was that, as they always attract rats, a great number would be destroyed, and the young plants could easily be thinned as they grew.

In order not to lose by the long wait between sowing the oak and gathering the expected product M. Rousseau planted vines between the furrows, and they in the seven years produced sufficient fruit to more than repay the cost of culture. Although at the end of ten years or so the vines were choked by the roots of the oaks, they had served their purpose.

Great care must be taken not to put manure near the roots of the young trees, for it would be fatal to the truffles. A remarkable phenomena takes place about the fifth year. The coarse grass which grows round the roots of the oaks disappears entirely. This is a sure sign that truffles are beginning to appear, as the ground then round the oaks is always sterile and bare, and no vegetation whatever will grow. This is a simple method of distinguishing truffle-oaks from others.

Five years after the first *truffière* was laid out M. Rousseau started a second on six acres of ground, and two years later was able to send from his first plantation some wonderful specimens of truffles to the Universal Exhibition. "These were obtained," he explained, "in a young oak wood that was planted expressly for the purpose of producing truffles." They were of exceptional



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TWO SOWS WHO FOUND 50LB. OF TRUFFLES IN TWO HOURS.

[Photograph.

size and quality, and had a delicious perfume. The sensation they caused repaid all the trouble and the ridicule which their cultivator had experienced; photographs of them appeared in all the papers, and a special agricultural commission was appointed to go to Carpentras and witness a hunt in the artificial *truffières*. Several pigs and one perfectly-trained dog were ready on the premises, and in presence of the committee in less than three hours 34lb. of splendid truffles—the medium ones were as large as a hen's egg—were obtained in this plantation of thirteen acres. These were sent to Paris, and fetched, at the wholesale price, £17. The land that only a few years previously had returned only £1 per acre is now bringing in £40 per acre, the value of the trees not included.

At a hunt we witnessed at this *truffière* with two very big sows the result, after two hours' smart work, was 50lb. of truffles, which were sold for £37 10s., and very nearly the

same quantity had been obtained the day before.

M. Rousseau has made a handsome fortune out of his clever experiment, and his example has been followed by many farmers. The Government have also started planting truffle-oaks, and before long Mount Ventoux to its summit will be a forest of oaks. There is already a Communal forest of 1,800 acres rented out to twenty-six proprietors, but the truffles are not as large as on the better cultured grounds in Carpentras, nor is the perfume so strong.

We left Carpentras with the wild idea of starting a *truffière* in England and being here the pioneers of a new rural industry that would revolutionize the agricultural districts—of being public benefactors. We even planned the monument which a grateful country would erect in our honour, after we had retired on an immense fortune. The scheme and its results is still a beautiful dream.