

Field Sports at Home and Abroad

ROUGH SHOOTING IN ENGLAND

All through the season the rough shooter enjoys the advantages or disadvantages afforded him by his own management. Walking up partridges in September, he must keep one eye glued to his dog, unless that animal is of mature years and as steady as a rock, for a young dog "feels good" at the beginning of the season, and is inclined to hustle his birds, and pursue the low-flying cheepers. It is all very well to unload, procure a stout sapling and teach him a lesson, but the birds are gone long since, and your chance of a shot with them. The writer had a half-bred black "spaniel" in truth a cross between a well-bred spaniel and a retriever. The dog could do anything, and worked beautifully, but he ran in. Every sportsman knows how difficult it is to eradicate this worst of doggy sins; in this case the disease was incurable. Each separate "winkle" was tried to stop him, but the dog could not or would not learn. However, as he retrieved splendidly on land and water, and worked as hard and as well as one had a right to expect, this fault was overlooked, and although at times the habit irritated to the verge of madness, it gave a special zest to the fray. No one who has not experienced it knows the feeling of impotent fury caused by seeing a joyous dog tear madly after a rabbit along the very hedge where a few minutes before a covey of partridges was marked down. Up they get with a whirl, the dog checks a moment and goes gaily on. You grind your teeth and look around for a crowbar, with which to fell the unspeakable cur, or you whistle and shout in thunderous tones. The moments pass, and at length a form appears with tail wagging proudly in the breeze, and a rabbit dangling from its jaws. Joyfully the dog lays his quarry at your feet, and smiles! Sometimes your patience has been too sorely tried, but as often as not the switch is cast into the hedge, and with a half-shamed "Go to heel, sir," you pass on, not having the heart to administer the sound thrashing the dog deserves.

In October it is pleasant to go pottering about the outlying hedges and the smallest "shaws" and gather in a few straggling pheasants and an odd bunny or two, or vary the proceedings by hitting you to one of the larger woods and attempting a pigeon stalk. It is not at all easy to stalk pigeons, the result being as a rule that you hear the clapping of many wings, catch sight of a few grey streaks, and all is over. If you have the time and the patience to make one of those pigeon-shelters favored of keepers, you may have some sport, though the dog will consider the performance very tame indeed. The rough shooter and his dog are inseparable, and should there be two guns and one dog, there is rarely much hedge-row sport for the person to whom the animal does not belong, for the intelligent brute takes exceedingly good care that he turns out the game on his master's side of the fence! A true story is told of a man who went shooting on an estate where there was a good deal of game. He took his dog with him, and the other members of the party had their dogs as well, but they lacked the intelligence of the first-mentioned canine. The hero of the story was a good shot, but when his dog kept on retrieving and retrieving he began to feel a bit worried. After a while the rest of the party appeared, followed by disgruntled dogs, and sorely tried keepers, while the guns themselves were furious, for they could not show more than a few brace of birds among them. Our friend looked at their meagre bag, then glanced at his own mountain of game, and at the perspiring, contented dog panting near by, and grasped the situation. His dog had retrieved everybody else's birds as well as his master's!

It is about Christmas-time that all the skill, knowledge, and patience of the rough shooter is called for if he is not to return home with a meagre bag. He has shot his ground well over, there are few pheasants left, partridges are as wild as hawks, and only some wily duck, approachable plover, and other oddments remain.

Josephus walking quietly at heel has become a sadder and a wiser dog, more given to reflection, and somewhat less to haste. It is freezing, and the ground crackles under foot. Out in the grey stubble a covey of partridges set up a hundred yards away, and fly half a mile before they think it safe to settle; the covey is ominous! Following our usual plan we start off at the boundary fence and work down the stream. The dog springs in at the word of command and hunts that confounded rabbit that will not come out into the open, and that he can never quite catch. Thank heaven Joe runs mute. A moorhen runs out of the undergrowth, bobs her tail and vanishes, and a couple of blackbirds start out with hoarse, high-pitched scolding. We wait as patiently as possible until the rabbit has gone to ground, and then draw the dog on with a low-voiced order. If there should be a pheasant we do not want him to run, as the farmer puts it "like a little swutch-oss" just yet. Coming to the reeds half-way along the stream the dog works through them carefully. Just as we turn away, the harsh familiar "scaap" of the snipe sounds behind us. Quickly wheeling the right barrel misses, but the choke lays him low. Joe retrieves promptly, having watched the bird fall, with head cocked on one side. The march is resumed, and Josephus crashes into a favorite thicket. A squeal of terror, and

a moment later he appears, having caught an unwary rabbit in his seat. It is unhurt, as Joe has a mouth in which he can carry eggs without breaking them. The dog is tied to a convenient post, and, as the bunny is not really wanted, he is freed, and bolts off in a hurry. Joe watches with a "well, you are a fool!" expression; for a minute he sulks, but being freed, and catching a fresh scent coming down wind, he pricks up his ears and gets going again.

Sixty yards ahead a cock pheasant breaks cover, but does not go very far ahead, perhaps 300 yards, before he turns into cover again. It was impossible to fire as there was a flock of sheep just beyond, and he flew low. Now comes the question of a stalk. If we drive straight ahead, ten to one the bird will run forward until he reaches the boundary the other side. The only thing to do is to make an exceedingly quick detour and come at the spot where we think he will be, in an oblique line, for if we go after him by working up the stream close by, he would hear us coming down wind, and turn and be off up stream himself as hard as he could go. Knowing Josephus well, it is thought advisable to put him on the leash, as if he started a rabbit on the way round the game would be up in every sense of the word! We walk two-thirds of a half-circle, and have the good luck to shoot a bachelor partridge on the way; then we strike off at an angle, making for the spot where we expect to find the pheasant. Quietly Joe is let off, and a sweep of the arm tells him the direction in which he is to go. But we have been outwitted, for the pheasant is evidently an old hand, and gets up far out in the field on the opposite side of the stream. He must have run there at the first hint of approaching danger. We make a few remarks about the dilly who would not come and be killed, and whilst wasting time doing so miss the chance of a long shot at a bunny. However, the Fates are lenient, and, at the corner where we have always felt that there really should be something, a teal gets up much to our surprise. He is an easy shot, and he joins the snipe and the partridge. Thereafter we leave the stream, and Joe eyes the covey as we approach with appreciation. It is herein that he often has his own little private hunt; but for all that we usually get something here. There are three coigns of vantage, and it is impossible to know which is the likeliest, the centre, the top of the wood, or the corner where it joins on to a long thin strip of undergrowth. We choose the corner, and turn the dog in. There is not the slightest shadow of doubt that if anything is in the wood he will find it, and do his best to send it in our direction. We stand well out in the field, for there is sometimes a high bird here. At the farthest end of the wood we hear a pheasant rise. Is it coming this way? Yes, it is! In a few moments the bird appears, rocketing as high as any driven bird. Two bangs and a double miss. Joe comes down to retrieve, finds his services are not wanted, and returns moodily to the wood, while we begin to think it is true that rocketers need a lot of practice. A stifled yelp from the dog warns us that he is at a rabbit's very scut; a crash and a rush, and the sporting bunny comes bounding forth with Joe two feet behind. We are used to it, so that shooting the rabbit so close in front of the dog does not seem particularly risky. He brings the rabbit along, and to our surprise, hastens back to the covey. That means something, surely. No sound or sign, and we are just about to call Joe in when we hear another pheasant rise, and come rocketing in our direction. When he appears we see he is also a rocketer. This time the aim is better, and he comes down with that rush which betokens a head shot.

The next item is a five-acre field which is covered with heather. Joe quarters it with care a little ahead of us, and owing to a stroke of luck—the passing overhead of a hawk—a covey of partridges do not get up until we are in easy range. It is hardly possible to miss such an easy right and left, and when a hare and two more "cottontails" have been added to what we have to carry we begin to feel most amicable toward mankind at large. Lucky it is for Josephus that this is so, otherwise he would not escape chastisement when he runs in and in the flurry of chasing a badly missed rabbit in a field of roots puts up some partridges already marked down for a stalk, and a cock pheasant. Then comes a period of slackness; up in the larger wood we cannot find a thing, not even a rabbit. We begin to think that a very sporting gentleman of our acquaintance, sometimes called a poacher, who lives near by, has again been coveting his neighbor's game—and has failed to stop at that only! At last, at the top of the wood, far out in the centre of a stubble field, we "spot" a large covey of partridges. The stalk is not impossible, but it will necessitate crawling almost ventre a terre round a hillock. We are feeling especially "good" today, and the ground is hard as a brick, so we resolve to make the attempt. Joe is tied securely to a hedge, admonished to lie down, and we set forth. The stalk is nearly accomplished, we are just about to rise to our feet, when, with a dash that almost knocks us over, Joe comes tearing up, trailing the cord he has bitten through behind him. There is very serious trouble, and Joe slinks at heel and looks woebegone, as we tramp angrily home. But we make friends after a while, and the two of us go on hungry, and with a modest yet pleasing bag, to eat a hunter's tea, and relate our adventures to a sympathetic audience.—R. W. B.

WILDFOWL SHOOTING IN SICILY

The gunners in Malta turn out in force on November 25, St. Catherine's day, in quest of the passing woodcock, though in most years with questionable result. The birds drop in on their way across the Malta channel en route to Albania and other favored coverts on the coasts of Greece, and their flight, being largely controlled by the prevailing weather, occasional good bags are made. Quail during the spring migration offer a few days' sport, if the shooter knows his ground on this confined little island, overrun as it is by local chasers. But beyond a day or two at quail on Gozo island a winter season at Malta possesses few attractions to those fond of shooting, and a study of the map shows only one or two alternatives, where leave is limited.

We put into Tunis for a ten days' expedition after rough game, but, hearing from several quarters a poor account of the snipe shooting and that red-legged partridges were only to be got on the hills some distance inland, we altered our course and headed for Sicily.

The Geneagles ran us speedily across to Syracuse in eight and a half hours, a party of three, with eleven days' leave ahead of us. Arriving about 10:30 p. m., we were subjected by the boatmen to instant extortion, and at once marked down as fit subjects for fleecing by every Sicilian brigand we had the misfortune to have dealings with. We spent an exasperatingly long time trying to recover our guns, cartridges, cases and tinned soups from the donatier brigade—all robbers of the first water—and they weighed our ammunition and charged us for its weight in brass, because the head of each cartridge was composed of that form of metal. After great efforts on the part of the British Consul on our behalf, we were allowed our goods for 75fr., and the custom house porters then demanded 15fr. for wheeling them to the hotel. All this in the dead of night!

We lost a whole day before a permis de chasse could be obtained from the lazy procrastinating officials, and what is more sad, we lost our tempers also. Eventually we placed ourselves in charge of an old and experienced guide, whose repertoire of sporting anecdotes anent "them-dux in de mash" at the Pontana, kept us in roars of laughter whenever he favored us with past experiences, extending over 30 years. "Don Felice Valerio" was on his card, "Interpreter, Factotum, and Guide." At cooking water hens, or coots, smoking our tobacco, or expressing a doubtful, though oft-repeated, taste for our whisky, he certainly was hard to beat.

We found on arrival the whole country inundated for miles, and the snipe all driven out of their favorite feeding grounds. We took a room at the Pontana Farm, 12/3fr. per diem, with every possible item extra, and thanks to a strong constitution, several changes of gear, and Don Felice's entertaining babble, with extracts from the guide-books thrown in gratis, a propos or otherwise—the latter quite immaterial to Felice—we survived five days' experience of most inferior sport. Shooting from a punt poled through the long reeds is a novel sensation, or it was so to us. Standing up in a narrow built boat, balancing himself as the bows are forced through the rushes, trying to preserve one's equilibrium and shoot, is quite a trick, and requires patient practice. Meanwhile, the Italian boatman, excellent at his own work, wrings his hands, shouts at you to "Fire strongly," and uses strong language if the bird is not knocked down at any distance up to 200 yards.

Salvatore was the man recommended to us, a sulky, ill-conditioned ruffian, wearing a greasy, black fur cap on his frowzy head. His knowledge of fowl was marvellous; the quick sense of sight alongside him; but the heart-rending contortions he had studied, and the wearisome monotony of his theatricals, solely assumed to blackmail his passengers, nearly caused us more than once to knock him overboard with the butt end of the gun. We refrained, partly because we did not shoot well at first and were annoyed in consequence, and partly because we should never have found our way alone out of the intricate maze of this great "mash," and Felice would have finished our whisky in anxious anticipation of our return.

Later on we allowed Salvatore to take his gun for the evening fighting, and, sitting back to back in the punt, hauled up on a clump of reeds, we imitated his distress whenever we fired and failed to stop the low-flying duck and teal. This pantomime had the desired effect; he kept his peace the following day, and preserved a dignified silence, which increased our own skill amazingly.

All the pensioners, pricked fowl, and cripples find their way out to the edges of the Pontana if their strength enables them to get there, when they pick up a living in the open water and paddle in to the long rushes when danger is at hand. The best sport we had was obtained by wading slowly and silently round these bays. Most of the snipe, driven by flood out of their proper feeding grounds, sought a resting place on the dry tufts of rushes sticking up here and there from deep water. The noise made by our splashing caused them to rise very wild, but, wheeling round high overhead, they would

return head to wind to drop in again, and a rocketing shot thus afforded us many an easy chance. One evening at sunset, in less than half an hour and close by the farm, we killed in five successive shots along the edges of the reeds a pochard, a jack snipe, a pintail, a teal, and a full snipe, and gathered all but the last, which was dropped into thick bushwood in the dark, and was not recovered until day-break next morning.

A nice strip of snipe land lies between the Pontana and the sea, just inside the long stretch of sand dunes that extend to Catania city, visible to the north. Poached by the feet of horses and not flooded out, as was the neighboring Pontana, birds lay well in the lupin covert and roost fairly within shot. Wading for hours in deep water just verging on freezing point becomes tiresome and monotonous, to say nothing of the discomfort of such labor for small result. Having postponed our departure on the bare chance of a change of weather, it was hard lines that a sharp frost and easterly wind should have set in the very day before we left, giving us a sample of what the sport should have been in these marshes in really rough weather.

What can be more exhilarating to a keen hand than to judge the speed of the fowl with nicety and precision in the still hours of the gloaming, and bring down mallard, wigeon, pintail, pochard, teal, shoveller and snipe out of the sky into the silent pool below? This sport appeals to one's fancy more than any other form of shooting. There is just that soupçon of wild solitude about the surroundings, that sensation of satisfaction and expectancy, when birds can be heard and not seen, tinged with the weird uncertainty of the sport, that keeps the blood in a glow throughout the coldest night and renders it one of the most charming and attractive sports that a man can indulge in. Garganey or gadwall we never saw. Sheldrake prefer foul feeding on the short to the sweet waters or an inland lagoon like the Pontana. Geese only seek refuge there in February.

Though the charges are extortionate, the people thieves and robbers of the first order, yet the place is worthy of its hire in stormy cold weather, and we cannot do better than advise those weary of the dissipations of a Malta season to go and try it. If the sport at Pontana is unsatisfactory, guns can be sent back by the guide to Syracuse, and a trip up Mount Etna, Monte Rossa, or even on to Taormina, Girgenti, or Palermo will well repay the sightseer. The scenery of Sicily is unsurpassed, and it is too well known to be damned with faint praise in this account of it. There is no sport elsewhere on the island. The great Baviere beyond Letini, to the west of the line, is too open and too deep for sport. The marshes at Syracuse have all been recently drained, so no time need be wasted there. Lemon groves, lava streams, and unclean villages are the leading marks left on our memory. But the ancient associations—historical, mythological, and legendary—are still the greatest treasure possessed by the picturesque peasantry of this modern Trinacria.

Our total bag for five days (two guns) was 95 head—mallard, wigeon, teal, shoveller, scoter, pintail, pochard, coot, water hen, purple gallinule, snipe, jack snipe, plover (golden, grey, and green), pigeon, redshank, and rabbit.—D. D., in Field.

SPRING AND THE TROUT FISHER

How does it happen? I cannot tell you. No one can tell you. You cannot tell yourself. But the event—no, event is too meagre a word—is familiar to all passionate anglers who have experimented with the wet fly. For many difficult months life has been supported without any acute hope of trout fishing. Perhaps the thing should not be dignified with so vital a word as "life." But you have pushed along somehow, saying this and doing that and eating the other, hoping fearfully that Providence will allow a man to watch yet one more spring disclose itself where a beloved stream makes music with the stones and boulders. Then all of a sudden a man is alive. Something has happened. It may be a watery gleam of sunshine on a grim February day, it may be the sight of immature trout exposed for sale on the slab of some soulless fish shop, it may be an overdue account from a tackleist, it may be one of a hundred jerks and jars which sets the machinery of expectation once more in motion. The result is that he who had been tediously sane goes gloriously again and surrenders himself—who shall say how gladly?—to the spring madness.

It was only two days ago that I escaped from the same house. Beaumont, an angler too, had come to see me on business. We were talking business studiously enough when his eye was lit by a fire which important affairs had not set going. It was also fixed upon a certain corner of my study, the corner in which I keep my rods. Now, so far as I am concerned, I am used to pay no more attention to those rods—from October to April—than a man may pay to some rooted ugliness with which the looking glass has made him so familiar, that horror has been merged in impotent acceptance of things as they are. The rods invariably mock me from that corner. Sometimes I have thought of



Sportsman's Calendar

MARCH

Sport for the month:

For the Angler—Trout-fishing from March 25; grise and spring salmon-fishing.

For the Shooter—Geese and brant, which may be shot on Vancouver Island and islands adjacent thereto—BUT NOT SOLD.

March 25—Trout-fishing legally opens for salt and fresh water.

Spring salmon at their best this month.

hiding them under a bed. But I have brazened it out, and have reached a negligent frame of mind. So I paid no instant attention to Beaumont's glassy stare until he came to the end of his endurance, and interrupted a grave discourse—my discourse—by saying, "Do you think they are warped?" Naturally I gazed at him with that uncomprehending vacancy always in the face of those who are rather rudely interrupted in a discourse. Then, "the rods, my dear ass," he explained. "Oh!" said I, "the rods?" in the manner of one who for the first time considered the existence of rods. "Yes," said Beaumont, "we'd better have a look." And there we were. It was but a step to the balcony overhanging the street where Beaumont stood, waving all my rods, one at a time, backwards and forwards, upwards and downwards, until curious persons began to be gathered together in the street below. That was why I did no more than handle the most excellent of all the rods myself, and why I took the rest away from Beaumont, pushed him inside the room, and shut the window firmly when he proposed to fix reels upon the butts and see whether he could switch a fly into an open window of a flat in the adjoining block of mansions. He really goes almost too mad.

But we all lose our sanity when the spring fever lays hands upon us. No passionate angler can resist the infection. There is no prophylactic except the river, and spring fever always antedates the spring. The symptoms are an unquiet restlessness and an unusual loquacity. You cannot stop the patient's babble of green fields. All of us who are subject to spring fever take the disease in much the same way. We get together in corners and talk—oh, such splendid talk, free, wholesome, and vainglorious, with flashes of a proper humility when the talker is reminded that fate may yet withhold him from the river. This is, rather freely rendered, the sort of thing:

A: "If only we were there." B: "Well, I must certainly have a whole day on the very top water this time; I shall push on beyond the fork, past that big farm on the left bank—with good water those ledge pools ought to hold a few half-pounders." C: "I dare say; I never did any good there myself—always found them bouncing about after midges and not meaning it." B: "Good heavens! why aren't we there now?" A: "I say, you know the sheep-pen pool?" B: "N-n-no." A: "Yes, you do; beyond the farm where the bull was—the place where he fell in and broke my rod." C: "I like that! What about the two separate times you fell in?" A: "You mean when you pushed me in?" B: "Oh, get on between you!" A: "Well, beyond the bull farm." B: "Oh, that place!" A: "Yes—well, I lost a tremendous fish there last year—the day after you went away. The deuce of a fish, he leaped out over the shallow, and broke me round that old snag. I'll have him out this year." C: "Seven weeks to go yet—it's simply sickening!" B: "I believe they'd rise today." C: "Of course they would, the brutes!" A: "We shall do well this year. I mean to—if I can get away." B: "Ah, if!"

A MODERN DIFFICULTY

A pretty girl, a handsome man,
With sweet moustache of brown.
Alas, the blamed electric light
Can never be turned down.

Minister—So you are going to school now, are you, Bobby?
Bobby—Yes, sir.
Minister—Spell kitten for me.
Bobby—Oh, I'm further advanced than that. Try me on cat.