

was beating, and had put it in his pocket, instead of carrying it in his hand, "to be out of his way," as he said, and not with any intention of stealing it, and I am quite sure he spoke the truth. But it seems Dodd, the under-keeper, who saw the legs of the rabbit sticking out of his pocket, didn't believe him, but taxed James with meaning to steal it, and threatened to tell the Squire; upon which West's blood got up, and high words passed between them.

The Squire hearing the dispute, inquired the cause, and he told West that he *hoped* what he said was true, but that he must say it was a very suspicious circumstance putting the rabbit in his pocket. Why didn't he carry it in his hand, as was usual?

"I made him no answer," said James to me; "but I might have said, 'Do you think I should have been such a fool as to leave the rabbit's legs dangling out of my pocket if I had been going to steal it?' I didn't want his rabbit. I can get a dozen of 'em any night I choose, or hares either, or pheasants, if I have a mind to it."

I have no doubt in my own mind that West spoke the truth about the rabbit; I am certain he had not the least idea of stealing it; as he said, it wasn't worth his while. No, the Squire was wrong there, and I am very sorry for it now, though at the time I was very glad.

In the present state of West's mind, I found little difficulty in persuading him to join Dick and me that night in beating up Purrwood for the wounded game. We knew that the keepers would be out at daybreak on the same errand, and so we thought we would just take the work off their hands for this time.

At one o'clock we agreed to meet in an old chalk-pit, just outside the wood; and, true to his appointment, James West made his appearance. There was a good moon overhead, but the sky was very cloudy, and a high wind blowing, so that the light of the moon was often obscured.

After a short consultation in the chalk-pit as to our plan of operations, we entered the wood, West leading the way up a broad green path that cut the wood in two. He took upon himself the task of bringing us to that part of the wood where most of the wounded birds were. Presently a white rabbit ran across the path; West aimed at it, but didn't fire; we each had a gun.

"There's a chap we can see to shoot, if we can't see nothing else," he said; "we'll have a white rabbit for supper, let come what will on it."

Poor fellow! little did he think what sort of a white rabbit he was destined to shoot. We had been in the wood about an hour and a half, and had picked up a good lot of wounded game of all sorts, besides knocking over a few hares and rabbits with our sticks, and smoking a brace or two of pheasants off their perch. We had not fired off a gun yet, indeed, we never did if we could help it; we took them more to defend ourselves from the keepers than for anything else. We were all three standing under a big beech packing our game into sacks, one for each, when I thought I heard the crackling of a branch.

"Whist!" I said; and we all three dropped work

instantly and listened. The snapping of the dead branches and the rustling of leaves was now plainly heard, and almost immediately a large black dog made its appearance amongst us. We knew him in a moment; he was the under-keeper's dog; the scent of our dead game had no doubt brought him.

It was plain enough that the keepers were out, and we were in a pretty fix. We tried to coax the dog to come to us, meaning to destroy him if we could catch hold of him, but he was too knowing for that, and only answered our coaxing with a low growl.

Presently a whistle was heard some way up the wood; the dog pricked his ears, and upon its being repeated, he ran swiftly off. This was a great relief to us, and, snatching up our sacks, we made for the opposite side of the wood to where the whistle seemed to come from, with every chance of effecting our escape.

We had nearly reached the edge of the wood, and had come to a halt, in order that one of us should go forward to see that the coast was clear, before we ventured into the open ground, when again the snapping of dried wood and the rustling of dead leaves was heard.

"There's that dog of Dodd's again," said West; "I'll shoot him if I can get a chance; see if I don't."

"Nonsense, let the dog alone," said I; "you'll be getting us all taken if you play the fool in that way."

At that moment the moon shone out bright, just upon the spot where the noise came from, and glanced upon something white.

"It ain't no dog; it's a white rabbit," cried West; "we haven't got *one* white rabbit this evening; but I'll have this one, let who will say nay; so here goes."

And though both Dick and I jumped forward to stop him, we were too late. Bang went the gun, and then we heard a noise in the bushes, and a gurgling, suffocating cry.

"Why, it's a hare you've shot, not a rabbit," said Dick; "don't you hear it cry like a child, as them hares always do? Come, look sharp and get it, Jim, and let's be off; we shall have them keepers upon us in no time; a great fool you was to fire."

Jim West dashed into the bushes, and I caught a glimpse of a figure rushing towards the same spot from the field, for we were just at the edge of the wood. In another instant, shriek upon shriek filled the air. I ran to the spot from whence the sound proceeded, burst through the bushes, and there I beheld a sight enough to freeze my blood. It was dreadful! I reeled back and leant against a tree, for I thought I should have fallen.

Jim West was standing opposite, his face convulsed with horror, his eyes fixed and his mouth open, but he neither moved nor spoke. On the ground lay his child, in the agonies of death; and leaning over the child, screaming and frantic with grief, was its mother.

I won't attempt to describe that scene; I could not if I would, for I was too terrified and bewildered to know or to mark what passed. All I know is, that the keepers surrounded us; they met with no resistance, and we were all taken; but I thought nothing of the poaching that night, nor for many another; the