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STUDIES IN THE ART OF RAT-CATCHING.

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PREFACE.

My publisher writes to say that he, and he thinks others too, would like to know how I ever came to write such a book as this! It came about in this way. Some two years ago, I was about to leave England for a considerable time, and a few days before starting, I went to stay in a country house, full of lads and lassies, to say good-bye. One evening, while sitting over the study fire, the subject of rat-catching came up and, as the aged are somewhat wont to do, I babbled on about past days and various rat-catching experiences, till one of the boys

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exclaimed, "I say, what sport it would be if they would only teach rat-catching at school! Wouldn't I just work hard then, that's all!"

The stories came to an end at bed-time, and I was then pressed by my hearers to write from foreign lands some more of my old reminiscences, and I readily gave a promise to do so. In this way most of the following stories were written; and in writing them, I endeavoured to carry out the idea that they were exercises to be used in schools.

I don't anticipate that head-masters will very generally adopt the book in their schools; but I hope it may, in some few instances, give boys a taste for a wholesome country pastime.

The characters and incidents are rough, very rough, pen and ink sketches of real people and scenes, and the dogs are all dear friends of past days.

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INTRODUCTION.

ADDRESSED TO ALL SCHOOLBOYS.

Ever since I was a boy, and ah! long, long before that, I fancy, the one great anxiety of parents of the upper and middle classes blessed with large families has been, "What are we to do with our boys?" and the cry goes on increasing, being intensified by the depreciation in the value of land, and by our distant colonies getting a little overstocked with young gentlemen, who have been banished to them by thousands, to struggle and strive, sink or swim, as fate wills it. At home, all professions are full and everything has been tried; and, go where you will, even the children of the noble may be found

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wrestling with those of the middle and working classes for every piece of bread that falls in the gutter. Nothing is *infra dig.* that brings in a shilling, and all has been and is being tried. The sons of the great are to be found shoulder to shoulder with "Tommy Atkins," up behind a hansom cab, keeping shops, selling wines, horses, cigars, coals, and generally endeavouring feebly to shoulder the son of the working man out of the race over the ropes. Fortunately Heaven tempers the wind to the shorn lamb, and I believe it has done so now. I believe kind Dame Nature during the last summer has stepped in and opened out an honourable path for many gentlemen's sons, that I think will be their salvation, and at all events, if it does not make them all rich, will, if they only follow it, make them most useful members of society and keep them out of mischief and out of their mammas' snug drawing-rooms.

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I have followed the path myself, and, after fifty years' tramp down it, have been forced to abandon it owing to gout and rheumatism. I have not picked up a big fortune at it, or become celebrated, except quite locally; but I have had a good time and helped the world in general, and am content with my past life.

I was the son of a worthy country parson, who in my youth proposed to me in turn to become a judge, a bishop, a general, a Gladstone, a Nelson, a Sir James Paget, and a ritualistic curate; but when talking to me on the subject the good old man always said, "Mind, my boy, though I propose these various positions for you, yet, if you have any decided preference yourself, I will not thwart you, I will not fly in the face of nature."

For some time I thought I should rather like to be a bishop, and to this day I think I should have made a good one; but *the*

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voice spoke at last, and my destiny was settled.

With the modest capital of five shillings given me by my father, and a mongrel terrier, given me by a poacher who had to go into retirement for killing a pheasant and half killing a keeper, I began my career as a—but I had better give you one of my professional cards. Here it is—

Bob Joy,

RAT-CATCHER

To H.R.H. The Prince of Wales, The Nobility and Gentry.

I had a struggle at first. Rats, full-grown ones, only fetched twopence each, and the system adopted by farmers of letting their

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rat-killing, for, say, three pounds a year for a farm of 400 acres, almost broke me; but I stuck to my profession, and do not regret having done so.

In those days, and during all my active life, I have had to work to live, owing to the constant scarcity of rats; but if I managed to make a living then, what might not be done now, when Nature has sent the rat to our homesteads by thousands, and farmers and others are being eaten off the face of the earth by them?

Why, my dear young friends, your fortune stares you in the face, and you have only to stretch out your hand and grasp it—no! I have made a mistake: you have a little more to do—you have, first, to learn your profession, which is no easy matter; and to enable you to do this, I intend writing the following book for the use of schools (which I herewith dedicate to the Head Masters of Eton,

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Harrow, Westminster, Rugby, and all other schools); but in placing this book on your school-desk, allow me to say that it is no good having it there through the long school hours unless you open it, read it, and deeply ponder over it; and more, my dear boys, let me pray that you will take it home with you, and, casting aside your usual holiday task, study it well, and, as far as possible, actively put in practice what I am going to try and teach you. Some fathers may wish their sons to enter on a more humble course of life, but this I rather doubt. However, should they do so, it will be only so much the better for those who take it up: there will be more room for them. Most mothers, I fear, will object to it on the ground that rats and ferrets don't smell nice; but this objection is not reasonable. They might as

well say that the whiff of a fox on a soft December morning as you ride to covert is not delicious!

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Respect your parents, respect even their prejudices; gently point out to your father that you are ambitious and wish for a career in which you can distinguish yourself. Above all, respect your mother, and show your respect by not taking ferrets or dead rats in your pockets into her drawing-room, and by washing your hands a little between fondling them and cuddling her. But to finish this sermon, let me point out that though in this great profession you will be everlastingly mixed up with dogs of all sorts, always make *them* come to *you*, and *never go to them*.

One last word. If in the following pages you come across a bit of grammar or spelling calculated to make a Head Master sit up, excuse it, and remember that I have been a rat-catcher all my life, and as a class we are not quite A1 at book learning.

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STUDIES IN RAT CATCHING FOR THE USE OF SCHOOLS.

CHAPTER I.

In the following elementary treatise for the use of public schools, I propose following exactly the same plan as my parson (a good fellow not afraid of a ferret or a rat) does with his sermons—that is, divide it into different heads, and then jumble up all the

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heads with the body, till it becomes as difficult to follow as a rat's hole in a soft bank; and, to begin with, I am going to talk about ferrets, for without them rat-catching won't pay.

Where ferrets first came from I am not sure, but somewhere I have read that they were imported from Morocco, and that they are not natives of Great Britain any more than the ordinary rat is. If they were imported, then that importer ranks in my mind with, but before, Christopher Columbus and all such travellers. Anyhow it is quite clear that nowhere in Great Britain are there wild ferrets, for they are as distinct from the stoat, the mouse-hunter, the pole-cat, etc., as I am from a Red Indian; and yet all belong to the same family, so much so that I have known of a marriage taking place between the ferret and pole-cat, the offspring of which have again married ferrets and in their turn

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have multiplied and increased, which is a proof that they are not mules, for the children of mules, either in birds or beasts, do not have young ones.

There are two distinct colours in ferrets—one is a rich dark brown and tan, and the other white with pink eyes; and in my opinion one is just as good as the other for work, though by preference I always keep the white ferret, as it is sooner seen if it comes out of a hole and works away down a fence or ditch bottom. I have never known a dark-coloured ferret coming among a litter of white ones or a white among the dark; but there is a cross between the two which produces a grizzly beast, generally bigger than its mother, which I have for many years avoided, though it is much thought of in some parts of the Midlands. I fancy (though I may be wrong) that the cross is a dull slow ferret, wanting in dash and courage, and not

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so friendly and affectionate as the others, and therefore apt to stick with just its nose out of a hole so that you can't pick it up, or else it will "lay up" and give a lot of trouble digging it out.

For rat-catching the female ferret should always be used, as it is not half the size of the male, and can therefore follow a rat faster and better in narrow holes; in fact, an ordinary female ferret should be able to follow a full-grown rat anywhere. The male ferret should be kept entirely for rabbiting, as he has not to follow down small holes, and being stronger than the female can stand the rough knocking

about he often gets from a rabbit better than his wife can.

In buying a ferret for work, get one from nine to fifteen months old, as young ferrets I find usually have more courage and dash than an old one. They have not been so often punished and therefore do not think

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discretion the better part of valour. However this will not be found to be an invariable rule. I have known old ferrets that would have faced a lion and seemed to care nothing about being badly bitten; whereas I have known a young ferret turn out good-for-nothing from having one sharp nip from a rat. Such beasts had better be parted with, for a bad, slow, or cowardly ferret is vexation of spirit and not profitable.

If I am buying brown ferrets I always pick the darkest, as I fancy they have most dash. This may be only fancy, or it may be the original ferret was white and that the brown is the cross between it and the polecat, and that therefore the darker the ferret, the more like it is in temper as well as colour to its big, strong, wild ancestor. Anyhow I buy the dark ones.

If I am buying female ferrets, I like big *long* ones, as a small ferret has not weight

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enough to tackle a big rat, and therefore often gets desperately punished. I like to see the ferrets in a tub, end up, looking well nourished and strong; and directly I touch the tub I like to see them dash out of their hidden beds in the straw and rush to spring up the sides like a lot of furies. When I put my hand in to take one, I prefer not to be bitten; but yet I have often known a ferret turn out very well that has begun by making its teeth meet through my finger. When I have the ferret in hand, I first look at its tail and then at its feet, and if these are clean it will do. If, on the other hand, I find a thin appearance about the hairs of its tail and a black-looking dust at the roots, the ferret goes back into the tub; or if the underside of the feet are black and the claws encrusted with dirt, I will have nothing to say to it, as it has the mange and will be troublesome to cure. All this done, I put the ferret

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on the ground and keep picking it up and letting it go; if when I do this it sets up the hairs of its tail, arches its back and hisses at me, I may buy it; but I know, if I do, I shall have to handle it much to get it tame. If, on the other hand, when I play with it the ferret begins to dance sideways and play, I pay down my money and take it at once, for I have never known a playful ferret to prove a bad one.

If when you get the ferret it is wild and savage, it should be constantly handled till it is quite tamed before it is used. Little brothers and sisters will be found useful at this. Give them the ferret to play with in an empty or nearly empty barn or shed where it cannot escape. Put into the shed with them some long drain pipes, and tell them to ferret rats out of them. The chances are they will put the ferret through them and pick it up so often, that it will learn there is nothing to

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fear when it comes out of a real rat's hole, and will ever after "come to hand" readily. You had better not be in the way when the children return to their mother or nurse. I have had disagreeable moments on such occasions.

Having got all your ferrets, the next question is how to keep them. I have tried scores of different houses for them. I have kept them in a big roomy shed, in tubs, in boxes, and in pits in the ground; but now I always use a box with three compartments. The left-hand compartment should be the smallest and filled with wheat-straw well packed in, with a small round hole a little way up the division, for the ferrets to use as a door. The middle compartment should be empty and have the floor and front made of wire netting, to allow light, ventilation and drainage. The third compartment should be entered from the middle one by a hole in the

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division, but should have a strong tin tray fitting over the floor of it covered with sand, which can be drawn out and cleaned; the front of this compartment, too, should be wire netting. The sand tray should be removed and cleaned every day, even Sundays. The house should stand on legs about a foot high. Each compartment should have a separate lid, and the little entrance holes through the divisions

should have a slide to shut them, so that any one division can be opened without all the ferrets rushing out. The bed should be changed once a week. Such a box as I have shown is large enough for ten ferrets. For a mother with a family a much smaller box will suffice, but it should be made on the same plan. For bedding use only wheat-straw. Either barley-straw or hay will give ferrets mange in a few days.

After housing the ferrets, they will require

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feeding. I have always given my ferrets bread and milk once or twice a week, which was placed in flat tins in the middle compartment; but care should be taken to clean out the tins each time, as any old sour milk in them will turn the fresh milk and make the ferrets ill. The natural food of ferrets is flesh—the flesh of small animals—and therefore it should be the chief food given. Small birds, rats and mice are to them dainty morsels, but the ferrets will be sure to drag these into their beds to eat and will leave the skins untouched; these should be removed each day. When my ferrets are not in regular work they are fed just before sunset; if they are fed in the morning they are no good for work all day, and one can never tell (except on Sundays) that one of the dogs may not find a rat that *wants* killing. The day before real work, I give the ferrets bread and milk in the morning, and nothing

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on the day they go out until their work is over. This makes them keen. Remember ferrets work hard in a big day's ridding, and therefore should be well nourished and strong; a ferret that is not will not have the courage to face a rat.

I have listened to all sorts of theories from old hands about feeding ferrets, but have followed the advice of few. For instance, I have been told that if you give flesh, such as rats and birds, to a ferret that has young ones, it will drag it into the straw among the little ones, who will get the blood on them, and then the mother will eat them by mistake. All I can say is, I have reared hundreds of young ferrets and have always given the mothers flesh. It is true that ferrets will eat their young, and the way to bring this about is to disturb the babies in the

nest. If you leave them quite alone till they begin to creep about I believe there is no danger.

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Then many old rat-catchers never give a ferret a rat with its tail on, as they believe there is poison in it. I remember one old fellow saying to me as he cut off the tail before putting the rat into the ferrets' box, "Bar the tail—I allus bars the tail—there's wenom in the tail." There may be "wenom" in it; but, if there is, it won't hurt the ferrets, for they never eat it or the skin.

If ferrets are properly cared for they are rarely ill, and the only trouble I have ever had is with mange, which, as I have said before, attacks the tail and feet. Most rat-catchers keep a bottle of spirits of tar, with which they dress the affected parts. It cures the mange, but, by the way the poor little beasts hop about after being dressed, I fear it stings dreadfully. I have always used sulphur and lard, and after rubbing it well in a few times I have always found it worked a cure. The *objection* to sulphur and lard

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is that it does not hurt, for I have noticed that sort of man generally prefers using a remedy that hurts a lot—that is, where the patient is not himself, but an animal.

No big day's ratting ever takes place without a ferret getting badly bitten. When this is so, the ferret should never be used again until it is quite well. It should be sent home and put in a quiet box, apart from the others, and the bites gently touched with a little sweet oil from time to time; or, if it festers much, it should be sponged with warm water.

I have often had ferrets die of their wounds, and these have usually been the best I had. Again, with wounds the old rat-catcher uses the tar-bottle, chiefly, I think, because it hurts the ferret, and therefore must have "a power of wirtue."

Before going further I should point out to all students of this ennobling profession that

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the very first thing they have to learn is to pick up a ferret. Don't grab

it by its tail, or hold it by its head as you would a mad bull-dog; but take hold of it lightly round the shoulders, with its front legs falling gracefully out below from between your fingers. Then when you go to the box for your ferrets, and they come clambering up the side like a pack of hungry wolves, put your hand straight in among them without a glove, and pick up which one you require. Don't hesitate a moment. Don't dangle your hand over their heads till you can make a dash and catch one. The ferrets will only think your hand is their supper coming and will grab it, with no ill intent; but if you put it down steadily and slowly, they will soon learn you only do so to take them out, and your hand will become as welcome to them as flowers in spring.

True, at first, with strange ferrets you may

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be bitten; but it is not a very serious thing if you are, as ferrets' bites are never venomous, as the bites of rats often are. I have in my time been bitten by ferrets many dozens of times and have never suffered any ill effects. There, I think that is enough for your first lesson, so I will send it off at once and get it printed for you.

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CHAPTER II.

The first chapter of this lesson-book has gone to the printer, so I don't quite know what I said in it, but I think we had finished the home-life of the ferret and were just taking it out of its box. Different professors have different opinions as to what is next to be done with it. Many (and they are good men too) think you should put it into a box about eighteen inches long, ten inches high, and ten wide; the box to be divided into two compartments, with a lid to each, and with leather loops to these lids through which to thrust a pointed spade so as to carry it on your shoulder. I have tried this plan, but I have never quite liked it. I have found that after a heavy day's work the box was apt to

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get heavy and feel as if it were a grandfather's clock hanging on your

back. Then the ratting spade was engaged instead of being free to mump a rat on the head in a hurry, or point out a likely hole to the dogs. When a ferret was wanted, all the others would dash out and have to be hunted about to be re-caught. Now and then the lids came open and let all out; and now and then I let the box slip off the spade and fall to the ground, and then I felt sorry for the ferrets inside it! No, I have always carried my ferrets in a good strong canvas bag, with a little clean straw at the bottom, and a leather strap and buckle stitched on to it with which to close it. Don't tie the bag with a piece of string—it is sure to get lost; and don't have a stiff buckle on your strap that takes ten minutes to undo. Remember the life of a rat may depend upon your getting your ferret out quickly. Never throw the bag

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of ferrets down; lay them down gently. Don't leave the bag on the ground in a broiling sun with some of the ferrets in it while you are using the others, or in a cold draughty place on a cold day; find a snug corner for them, if you can, and cover them up with a little straw or grass to keep them warm.

If, when carrying your ferrets, they chatter in the bag, let them; it is only singing, not fighting. I have never known a ferret hurt another in a bag. Always bag your ferret as soon as you have done with it; don't drag it about in your hand for half an hour, and don't put it in your pocket, as it will make your coat smell.

When I have done work and turned towards home, I have made it a rule always to put a dead rat into the bag, as I think it amuses the ferrets and breaks the monotony of a long journey; just as when I run down

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home I like taking a snack at Swindon Station, just to divert my mind from the racketing of the train and the thought of the hard seat. When you get home, give the ferrets a rat for every two of them, if you can afford it, for then they need only eat the best joints. If you have not many dead rats and want to save some for the morrow, one rat for three ferrets is enough for twenty-four hours; but don't forget to give them water or milk.

I think I have said enough as to the management of ferrets, and will

go on to speak of the necessary tools. The chief thing is a good rapping spade. What the musket is to the soldier, the spade is to the rat-catcher. You may get on without it, but you won't do much killing. I have tried many shapes, but the one I like best is on the pattern of the above drawing. It should not be too heavy, but yet strong; and, there

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fore, the handle should be made of a good piece of ash, and the other parts of the best tempered steel, and the edge should be sharp enough to cut quickly through a thick root. The spike should be sharp, so as easily to enter the ground and feel for a lost hole. This will constantly save a long dig and much time; besides, one can often bolt a rat by a few well-directed prods in a soft bank—not that I approve of this, as there may be more than one rat in the hole, and by prodding out one you are contented to leave others behind. No, I think the ferret should go down every hole challenged by the dogs, as then you are pretty sure of making a clean job of it.

Besides the spade, I have always kept a few trap boxes. These are to catch a ferret should one lay up and have to be left behind. I bait them with a piece of rat and place them at the mouth of the hole, and it is rare

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I don't find the ferret in it in the morning. I also take one of these traps with me if I am going where rats are very numerous; then, if a ferret stops too long in a hole, I stick the mouth of the trap over the hole and pack it round with earth and stop up all the bolt holes, and then go on working with the other ferrets. When the sluggard is at last tired of the hole, it walks into the trap, shoving up the wire swing door, which falls down behind it, and there it has to stop till you fetch it.

If I am going to ferret wheat stacks where rats have worked strong, I take with me half a dozen pieces of thin board about a foot long. I do so for this reason. The first thing rats do when they take possession of a stack is to make a good path, or run, all round it just under the eaves; and when disturbed by ferrets, they get into this run and keep running away round and round the

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stack without coming to the ground. Therefore, before putting in the ferrets, I take a ladder, and going round the eaves of the stack I stick the boards in so as to cut off these runs, and when a rat goes off for a gallop he comes to "no thoroughfare," and feeling sure the ferret is after him, he in desperation comes to the ground, and then the dogs can have a chance. I once killed twenty-eight rats out of a big stack in twenty minutes after the ferrets were put in, all thanks to these stop-boards; and though I ran the ferrets through and through the stack afterwards, I did not start another, and so I believe I had got the lot.

I think I have enumerated all the tools required for rat-catching. I need not mention a knife and a piece of string, as all honest men have them in their pocket always, even on Sundays. Some rat-catchers take with them thick leather gloves to save

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their getting bitten by a rat or a ferret; but I despise such effeminate ways, and I consider he does not know his profession if he cannot catch either ferret or rat with his naked hands.

I must now turn to the subject of dogs—one far more important than either ferrets or tools, and one so large that if I went on writing and writing to the end of my days I should not get to the end of it, and so shall only make a few notes upon it as a slight guide to the student, leaving him to follow it up and work it out for himself; but in so doing I beg to say that his future success as a rat-catcher will depend on his mastering the subject.

But, before proceeding further, I am anxious to say a few words in parenthesis for the benefit of the Head Masters of our schools. Admirable as their academies are for turning out Greek and Latin scholars, I

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cannot help thinking a proper provision is seldom made in their establishments for acquiring a real working knowledge of the profession of a rat-catcher; and I wish to suggest that it would be as well to insist on all those students who wish to take up this subject keeping at school at least one good dog and a ferret, and that two afternoons a week should be set apart entirely for field practice, and that the cost of this should be jotted down at the end of each term in

the little school account that is sent home to the students' parents. I know most high-spirited boys will object to this and call it a fresh tyranny, and ever after hate me for proposing it; but I do it under a deep sense of duty, being convinced that it is far better they should perfectly master the rudimentary knowledge of such an honest profession as that of rat-catcher, than that they should drift on through their school life with no definite

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future marked out, finally to become perhaps such scourges of society as M.P.s who make speeches when Parliament is not sitting. Judging from the columns of the newspapers, there must be many thousands who come to this most deplorable end; and if I can only turn one from such a vicious course, I shall feel I have benefitted mankind even more than by killing rats and other vermin.

Now I must return to the subject of dogs, and in doing so I will first begin on their masters, for to make a good dog, a good master is also absolutely necessary. Anybody that has thought about it knows that as is the master, so is the dog. A quiet man has a quiet dog, a quarrelsome man a quarrelsome dog, a bright quick man a bright quick dog, and a loafing idle ruffian a slinking slothful cur.

First of all, then, the dog's master must understand dog talk; for they do talk, and

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eloquently too, with their tongues, their ears, their eyes, their legs, their tail, and even with the hairs on their backs; and therefore don't be astonished if you find me saying in the following pages, "Pepper told me this," or "Wasp said so-and-so." Why, I was once told by a bull terrier that a country policeman was a thief, and, "acting on information received," I got the man locked up in prison for three months, and it just served him right. Having learnt dog language, use it to your dog in a reasonable way: talk to him as a friend, tell him the news of the day, of your hopes and fears, your likes and dislikes, but above all use talk always in the place of a whip. For instance, when breaking in a young dog not to kill a ferret, take hold of the dog with a short line, put the ferret on the ground in front of him, and when he makes a dash at it say, "What *are* you up to? War ferret! Why, I gave

four and six

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pence for that, you fool, and now you want to kill it! Look here (picking the ferret up and fondling it), this is one of my friends. Smell it (putting it near his nose). Different from a rat, eh? Rather sweet, ain't it? War ferret, war ferret! Would you, you rascal? Ain't you ashamed of yourself? War ferret, war ferret!" Repeat this a few times for two or three days, and when you first begin working the dog and he is excitedly watching for a rat to bolt, just say "War ferret" to him, and he will be sure to understand. Should he, however, in his excitement make a dash at a ferret, shout at him to stop, and then, picking up the ferret, rub it over his face, all the time scolding him well for what he has done; but don't hit him, and probably he will never look at a ferret again.

In my opinion there is nothing like a thrashing to spoil a dog or a boy; reason with them and talk to them, and if they are

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worth keeping they will understand and obey. Mind, a dog must always obey, and obey at the first order. Always give an order in a decided voice as if you meant it, and never overlook the slightest disobedience. One short whistle should always be enough. If the dog does not obey, call him up and, repeating the whistle, scold him *with a scold in your voice*. Don't shout or bawl at him for all the country to hear and the rats too, but just make your *words sting*. If he repeats his offence, put a line and collar on him and lead him for half an hour, telling him all the time why you do so, and he will be so ashamed of himself that the chances are he will obey you ever after.

Put yourself in the dog's place. Fancy if, when you have "kicked a bit over the traces" at school, the head-master, instead of thrashing you, made you walk up and down the playground or cricket-field with

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him for half an hour; but no, that would be too awful; it would border on brutality! But you would not forget it in a hurry.

We humans often behave well and do good, not because it is our duty so to do, but for what the world will say and for the praise we

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