SHOOTING.

A MORNING WITH THE BLACKCOCK.

THAT HEATHGAME is fast disappearing from his ancient haunts is well known. The older school of sportsmen never meddled with the cocks when in the moult; they generally waited on the young birds till the oats had been cut off the moor edges and the lambs weaned for the year. The modern gunner seems, however, to take a pleasure in firing into the members of the covey when they are as tame and as helpless as ducklings on a milldam. This is most unfortunate, as every cock, when the season comes round, wants half a dozen of grey hens; and the young hens, less wary than the cocks, invariably fall in front of the fowling-piece, when the fragments of brake shells have scarcely been cleared off their backs.

Reclamation works have also to be considered, and blackgame have gradually been deprived of their natural food through the enterprise of the moorland Scottish farmer. We never now find the trailing azalea (Loiseleuria procumbens) in such dense masses as we have seen on the sides of the Grampians and some of the Perthshire ranges. The berries of this plant in olden times afforded in severe winters a constant supply of food to the blackcock; so also did the great bilberry and the little bilberry, generally known as the blaeberry, which, as we know from Tannahill's delightful song, "Bloomed so delightfully on the Braes of Balquither." The larch cones still afford him a meal in early spring; equally generous are the hazel, the birch and the alder, but the bird has to wait the year through he in on short allowance, and is forced at times to hang round the sheep troughs when the shepherd brings out a sackful of mill-siftings to his hungry flock.

That blackgame should not be shot before the last week in September I am strongly of opinion; and so, I believe, are many eminent authorities on Scottish shooting. The young cocks in September will separate from the hens; and so the hens may, with judicious shooting, be preserved, while the male portion of the stock may be thinned down. By doing this, and paying some attention to the cultivation of the bilberry and other forms of natural heath food, we might still keep this grand Scottish bird with us. Like the golden eagle and the capercaillie, its extermination is gradually threatened.

"The auld blackcocks are getting on their steering gear," said my host one night after a grouse drive; "what say you to a morning with them, in the corn stooks? They have dropped off their old feather, and are getting very conceited about their new plumage. The blackcock is as proud of his tail as the fox is of his brush, and he has reason, too, for I know he cannot guide himself properly without it, and shoves his beak up to windward when an old gruise cock would go away in front of you like a yacht under her spinnaker."

We very readily agreed to his proposition; for grouse shooting in all its most pleasing modes, over dogs, without dogs, or in butts, grows as monotonous as a spot-stroke champion match at billiards. Next morning saw us by the side of a field of stooks at a distance of two miles from the lodge, bent on war against blackgame, young or old.

We crawled cautiously along the inside of an old dry whinstone dyke topped with divotts. It was a combination of the old Scottish fell dyke and unmortared trap rock. Several times we had a glimpse over the top or through a crevice, our hair blowing in the wind, for our caps had been relegated to the keeper's game bag. An impertinent weasel, which had been out on the early hunt, followed us with its usual natural curiosity; and I could hear McNicol whisper to himself somewhat savagely, "When you're bitin' the soft end o' the jaws o' a steel trap twa days after this my bonnie freen', you'll maybe no be so brisk or so lively." In the end the weasel stopped his pursuit, no doubt persuaded in his mind that we meant no harm to his wife and family.

When we had reached the end of the dyke, some grouse rose from the edge of an uncut rig of corn; but, though tempted, we left them alone. "If you are out for a blackcock, stick to your blackcock." Sandy McNicol, with the keen-eyed commissariat of a tod-hunter's family, after a session or two on mountain fox, elected to reconnoitre. After a long and careful look round, he at last dropped down flat to the ground with the remark, "They're no a hunner yards off; there's been a bit o' corn they could na cut with the scythe, it's been so laid and twisted, and they're thrang (busy) at it now." Yet how were we to get at them? Two rows of stooks lined up the field from the end of the dyke afforded some certainty of cover over our approach, but this seemed scarcely enough, for on looking up between these rows we saw one or two young birds on the stook tops. Their possible flight home in a fixed direction, the keeper to startle them and put them over us, was suggested; but to this Sandy McNicol said, "Na! na! (the blackcock, in his opinion, was a most untrustworthy in regard to his course homeward. "If we bide a wee, you'll see they all get on the stooks thegither," said the old man; "there will be no leading the day, and we need not be in a hurry."

Whatever may be said against the use of tobacco in deer-stalking, there is nothing to be said against what McNicol called "a wee bit draw o' the pipe" in getting within open range of a blackcock. And so, as we crouched close to the corner end of the wall, we clouded out of competition the mist on the brae with grey pipe reek. It was true as the keeper said. The main body of the birds settled on the tops of the stooks, where the oats were no doubt less milky and generally more palatable than those uncut, which lay along the ground. The industry with which th se sable gentlemen filled their crops was marvellous. Disturbances by shepherds, farm grieves, and others let them know that it was well to feast when they had the chance. It was wise possibly that they should enjoy their morning meal, for other treats were in store for them.

"Noo, gentlemen," said McNicol after taking a good look at them, "they have just about had their fill, and if they should sicht the shepherd coming over the face o' the brae they will be like a lot o' raised black cattle at Falkirk tryst."

In Scotland, where reaping machines are not generally in use, they still gather up when ploughing the ridges in the stubble, leaving, in so doing, an open or deep furrow. This furrow acts as a kind of natural drain in times of heavy rains. It was up one of these furrows that we followed the keeper on hands, knees, and breast, keeping gun muzzles well away to the right. Several times, according to counsel from the front, we had to flatten ourselves tortoise fashion and lie still. These were the days of the ground. The industry with which th se sable gentlemen filled their crops was marvellous. Disturbances by shepherds, farm grieves, and others let them know that it was well to feast when they had the chance. It was wise possibly that they should enjoy their morning meal, for other treats were in store for them.

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As he said "Noo!" we both rose to our left feet, and firing from the hip sent the barrels into the near and far stooks. When we got up we found the stubble, nearly all young cocks; and the keeper carefully marking one which went off very sick in the direction of the lodge. "I'll find him," said the old man. "He'll sit and rock on the old Scotch fir yonder till he dies, and then he'll drap doun. Disturb him, and he'll fly anywhere, and may be drap into the loch." It was just as he stated, we found him lying as one might expect to find a grouse in the May time, stiff and cold, stark, his beak still holding his last little black snail in the crofter's oats.

As there were a number of outlying young cocks amongst the yellow turnips, in this part heavily cultivated for the feeding of sheep in the back end of the year, on the advice of McNicol we pushed on to a large Scotch fir tree, which stood up in solitary gaunt-like and ghostly fashion over the silvery birches. Joined by his son and his favourite retriever dog, Richie, he put forward in our direction a lot of nice young cocks, warning us not to pull at the hens. They came up to us in what I might call a sort of parabolic style of flight, keeping low to the ground as they neared the tree. We waited till they were in the air over the branch—when their mandibles were open, so to speak—and they had it full in the breast, dropping with such thumps on the ground as betokened their weight. Amongst the slain was an old third-season cock, from the beak of which the old keeper, in calm philosophic fashion, picked out a pellet with his penknife. The warrior of more than one spring tournament was slain, and the grey hens would look for his championship in vain. "I have sometimes a wee bit sympathy for them," said the old keeper, "for when the back end o' May comes in I have noticed that the greyhen wi' six or eight eggs under gets very cross and crabbit, no' like the hen craw, which is glad to see her guidman about the place wi' what grub he can pick up. If she weere the Scotch cheek plaid breeks, there is no wonder that the old gentleman in the black Presbyterian claith tak's himself off at times to some lonely corner o' the hill." R.

AMONG FEN, EAS, AND HIGH GRASS.

HUNTING MEN only know two sensations in the year, cub-hunting and fox hunting proper. Those who shoot first deal with grouse, blackcock, and perhaps a deer or two in Scotland, and then comes the pheasant, to the unspeakable delight of the fashionable pheasant, to say nothing of odd days among the rabbits. Pheasant shooting is like the "set piece" at the Crystal Palace fireworks, which concludes the evening in a burst of splendour, soaring on high, and falling in showers of light. It finishes the sportsman's year with the rustling wings of several hundred beautiful creatures sweeping aloft, and displaying their metallic tints, and falling in a drift of feathers among the fern, after he and his friends have fired. To take another resemblance, just as the man who has been catching many salmon is contemptuously indifferent towards the charms of trout fishing, so the crack shot at pheasants too often thinks little of the little brown bird of September. The partridge does not afford much variation in shooting. Its swift flight occurs on the wing is what the shooter has to contend with. Not so the pheasant. He is the Proteus of game birds, and flies now high, now low, now with apparent slowness, now with the swiftness of a meteor. At one moment, like the woodcock, it takes advantage of every tree, at another it springs on high like the rocket from which it has received its sporting appellation. Among fern, eas, or high grass and brushwood, the sportsman never knows where it will run before rising. It will double and twist in such a district, and give difficult shots, which are not for tirros. No wonder, therefore, that a good shot prefers pheasant to any kind of English shooting.

It cannot be denied that shooting driven pheasants is the more scientific method; but numbers, in the prime of life, still more when falling, like the October landscape, into the sere and yellow leaf, infinitely prefer the charms of shooting pheasants over dogs on rough ground. On the other hand, when a long line of woodlands and coverts is strategically beaten and several hundred pheasants brought up to a number of expectant sportsmen, it is impossible for the owner not to feel a glow of satisfaction. The keepers and beaters naturally participate in this; the gentlemen obtain what they want, plenty of shooting, and provided that the killing of the birds is speedy as is the part of good shots, there can be no room for hostile criticism.

Our fathers, it will be said, did not know of this mode of shooting pheasants. Such an objection at this, however, may at once be disposed of by the assertion that had they known of it they would certainly have adopted it, as we do. But it required improved guns, much rearing of pheasants, and a varied and enlarged experience before pheasants could be driven. When these essentials, however, are obtained, why should they not be employed in shooting driven birds? And as for "the hecatombs of slain pheasants" and the like, which the non-sporting newspapers dwell upon, if these beasts of pheasants are used as wholesome food, and perhaps reach classes which in old days knew nothing of the delightful savour of a roast pheasant, is it not a distinct gain to civilisation? I should be the last to advocate cruelty; but as a matter of fact, pheasants shot by driving are generally shot most mercifully, as being accounted for by experts in the art of shooting. No sensible person nowadays listens to diatribes upon "battue shooting" of pheasants, whatever that may mean.

The supply of wild birds is always more or less uncertain, whereas a couple of keepers with experience, care, and a sunny grass-field ought always to be able to rear a large percentage of birds from eggs. If a wild pheasant's first set of eggs be destroyed, it promptly lays another, and even a third, should misfortune ove take the second batch. But then unsettled weather and early frosts too often work havoc with the cheepers. We have seen these little things in the fields just before the middle of September. He who wishes to provide good shooting for his friends is careful to supplement the wild birds on the estate by artificially-reared birds. Not that this is always successful. A squire has been known to lead his friends to a small spinney and say "Here we turned down 300 pheasants." It was sad to see his face when the line of beaters came out and not a bird had appeared. This kind of mishap, however, may only mean that the birds have removed to another plantation which they like better. In one case keepers have been known to lead to buy eggs, save from duly licenced dealers or at well-known game farms. It stands to reason that if one man's keeper buys eggs from an estate, the keepers on that property must, in their turn, buy from some other estate. It should be the interest of every straightforward squire and honest keeper to discontenance the practice of selling pheasants' eggs at all, even if it could not prevent the purchase of pheasants' eggs from legitimate establishments. At present, estate owners have not to struggle against the custom of eating pheasants' eggs as a delicacy, which seems to have been common in the first half of last century. Law, the mystic, in one of his most celebrated books published in 1726, says of a glutton, "Nothing could put rebellious thoughts into his head concerning the should this gentleman's sensuality eating of pheasants' eggs." The supply of pheasants throughout the country must in those days have been far inferior to the numbers which may now be found in any good shooting district.

It is vain to speculate on the chances of good shooting on the first day of the season. As has been shown, it depends on many contingencies. In any case a shooting excursion in early October is a delight to the eyes. This year the foliage hangs in deep green masses, thanks to the rainy season; only here and there is a sycamore or a willow touched with gold. Bracken has a few lighter shades intermixed, but it, too, is still very green. In many manors shooting will be delayed until the leaves fall, only a few pheasants will be bagged which rise by chance in the woods when they are shooting partridges. The middle of October would in most years be a better date for the beginning of pheasant shooting than the First. Sport is not a little indebted to poetry; and for the poetry of pheasant shooting no one need look beyond Pope's "Windsor Forest." But in real life as many poetical sides of this recreation greatly endear it to the literary sportsman. The pageant of autumn, painted in green and gold, is everywhere gorgeous in most years; and equally charming, however the long-standing emulation is settled between shooting driven birds and walking up wild birds in rough ground.

PELAGIUS.

DUCK SHOOTING IN THE ARGENTINE REPUBLIC.

IT HAS LONG been a source of surprise to me, taking into consideration the large number of Englishmen resident in the Argentine, never to have seen or at most only mention any notice of the duck shooting which is so easily obtainable here, and which of its class, I should imagine, it would be hard to beat.

The variety is very great, and when I say that in a bag of forty head recently shot here there were as many as seven different kinds, this will be all the more easily understood. The mallard, which I have well represented, there being as many as twenty-two species of this group in the country. I give the following as those most commonly met with in the swamps and lagoons in this district. In ducks we find the brown pintail (Dafila spinicauda), the whistler (Dendrocygna fulva), the red shoveller (Spatula platalea), the Chiloe wigeon (Mareca sibilatrix), a handsome bird. In teal we have the blue-winged and yellow-billed species (Querquedulæ cyanoptera and flavirostris). To these we can add several kinds of plover and snipe, such as the American golden plover (Charadrius dominicus), known as the "chorlo;" the batitú (Actiturus bartramius), and the Paraguayan and painted snipe (Gallinago paraguiæ and Rhynchæa semicollaris), the latter a beautiful little bird, at times very common.

The swans are represented by that handsome bird, the black-necked swan (Cygnus nigricollis), and his goose-like *confrère*, Cygnus coscoroba, called "gauso" by the natives.

To those interested in collecting specimens for preservation, an immense field presents itself, as, in addition to the above, there are many species of stork, heron, and water-fowl, flamingos and spoonbills, the latter in countless numbers—thus affording the ornithologist a rare opportunity of making a very fine collection of aquatic birds.

The shooting is very general in the eastern part of the country, the northern portion embracing the large rivers, with their numerous reed-fringed islands; and to the south the low-lying land adjoining the coast of the province of Buenos Aires, which is more particularly referred to here, and which is probably as good a part as any. The present season is a particularly bad one, as we are suffering from the effects of a protracted drought. The duck that have not migrated to the permanent fresh-water lakes—of which we have none in the immediate neighbourhood—are now to be found in large numbers in the swamps fed by tidal creeks.

On re-perusing the above lines on the birds to be obtained here, I think it may be of interest to some of your readers to know what can be done amongst them. I venture, therefore, to give a short account of a day's shooting at which I assisted lately, as one of a party of four guns.

A fine morning, with a strong, cold, westerly wind blowing; it was fully 11.30 before we arrived at our ground, after a ten-mile gallop. Here we found our cart, with guns, lunch, &c., awaiting us. The spot we had chosen was an extensive shallow lagoon, fed by two creeks, which run into it at the one end at opposite corners, the intervening neck being covered with a thick growth of tall reeds, affording excellent covert. These creeks converged again about three-quarters of a mile higher up (up wind), where they fell into another large lagoon We could see on the broad expanse of water large flocks of duck, and here and there regiments of flamingoes. Crossing on to the neck we divided, parties taking up at the mouth and the others a bit higher up on either creek. We had soon selected a convenient shelter, taking care that it should have a fairly open space round it. This latter precaution we are compelled to take, as, unfortunately, not having a dog, unless one's birds fall into the open, one has but a poor chance of picking them up; so useless is it that we should shoot at a bird that is not seen to fall on some spot. I mention this fact as it will be understood we were very much handicapped against making a good bag. A shot on the right was the signal for several big lots to get up off the lagoon; and as they came flying low up wind they gave us some easy chances. Some of them were turned by the upper guns, and, getting up, came down wind at a good height, affording some very pretty shooting. We met at about half-past one for lunch, the duck by that time having stopped flying, and gone to the upper lagoon. We found we had picked up forty head, while two of us had the bad luck to lose several birds. As the latter part of the afternoon is always the best, we were in no hurry; but three o'clock saw us in position, lying down about half a mile higher up. Having sent a boy on beyond the duck to put them up, we soon had them stringing down over us, and had a capital afternoon's sport. Suffice it to say that when we met at about five—sundown—we found we had got another ninety-five head, making a total of 135 for the day. The bag was made up as follows: Fifty-five and a half couple of duck and teal, nine and a half couple of Bartram's sandpipers, three swan, two flamingoes (the latter were shot, being in particular good plumage). More might easily have been obtained. As we were coming away it was a fine sight to see the strings of flamingoes slowly winging their way over the glassy water, their bright plumage showing up to perfection in the fiery rays of the setting sun.

As will be gathered from the above short account, we had made no preparations, having started to take things as they came. The result to be obtained by a properly organised and well equipped party I leave to the reader to imagine. J. R.

RED-LETTER DAYS IN THE BHOOTAN TERAI.

THE RHAIMATUNG flows from the unknown mountains of Bhootan, and at the base of the hills passes through a vast salt-lick, where the rhinoceros and other mighty beasts come, when disease assails them, to eat of the tonic with which all denizens of the forests are acquainted, and which they regard as a panacea for all ailments. But a rotting carcase or the huge bones of a tusker, gradually bleaching in the rays of a tropical sun—for there are occasions to be found close by the river side, where the monster in his agony has come to slake his thirst, only to sink on his knees as his quivering limbs fail to support him, and then to roll over in his last struggle for life—shows that even nature's remedy is of no avail when death once sets his seal. This salt-lick is intersected by numerous streamlets, which one by one unite, until, after half a mile, they join into broad river, which during the rainy season, from May till September, is a raging torrent, with steep banks overhung by dense thickets and trees; while the adjoining jungles, though beauteous with ferns and gorgeous orchids, are a network of creepers and undergrowth, which render them almost impassible to the most ardent shikari. By November, however, the muddy torrent has changed to a shallow crystal stream, lying deep below the straight banks, with glittering sand on each side; the undergrowth has died away in the jungles, and where, two months previously, there were dark impenetrable thickets, there now are shady glades and grass a foot or so in height.

It was soon after daybreak, in the chill of a November morning, as the elephant on which I was seated wended its way towards the salt-lick of the Rhaimatung, some two miles below the salt-lick mentioned, when my mahout first noticed tracks of a large herd of bison which had evidently only an hour or two previously forded the stream; for the marks of the hoofs were deep and quite dry, with the sand still gradually settling down. We halted for a few moments, while I threw off my sleep, rubbed my sleepy eyes; for we had started on our trip at 2 a.m. by bright moonlight, as it was a long journey to the Rhaimatung, which we wanted to reach at daybreak, and the slow sway of the elephant, with the monoton us swish of the branches of trees and rustle of the grass, as we brushed through the jungle hour after hour, had so lulled me to sleep that even the fresh breeze from the Himalayas had not thoroughly aroused me. But the sight of the bison tracks shook off all drowsiness quickly enough, and, putting across my knees a double-barrelled 8-bore duck gun, loaded with solid bullets and 6drs. of powder in each barrel—with a .450 Express in reserve, laid ready to my left hand on the pad—we turned our course across the river and followed the tracks through the jungle. For a mile or two the herd had kept together, and we pushed along fast; but then they had scattered to graze, and in consequence our progress slowed down, for the tracks perpetually crossed each other, and it was hard to tell what line the bison were really taking. Still, bit by bit, we were closing on them; for even to a novice it would have been apparent how fresh the tracks freshened as the hours passed. The grass was still springing back where the heavy hoofs had trodden it down; and twigs could be seen here and there broken, but with the leaves fresh and green, until at last the mahout whispered to me, "Sahib, do you smell them?" His eyes shone and his teeth gleamed as he smiled with the joy of slaughter to come, and the exhilarancy of heart to stock his hut for days and days. I nodded in reply; for the smell of a herd of bison is very similar to that of tame cattle, and noticeable at some distance. In following up the prints of what seemed a heavy beast, judging from the large hoofs, we cast a wide circle, and palpably were returning in the direction from which we had come; so we halted to consult, as it seemed as if we were wasting time, and should ought to turn again and push straight on. There was a deathly silence in the jungle as the mahout whispered, "Sahib, I feel sure we are in the midst of them;" but that faint whisper was sufficient to change the silent jungle into a perfect pandemonium of noise. In one second the whole place was alive; from every thicket crashed huge beasts as we