

CHAPTER XXVI.

Sleeping in Shepherd's House—Start in the Morning—Eagle—
Wild-geese—Find Deer ; unsuccessful shot—Rocky Ground
—Wounded Stag—Keeper and Dog—Walk Home.

BEFORE the earliest grouse-cock had shaken his plumage, and called his mate from her heather couch, I had left my sleeping-place in the building that did duty for a barn, where deep in the straw and wrapped in my plaid I had slept sound as a deer-stalker, and I fancy no person sleeps more soundly. I had preferred going to roost in the clean straw to passing the night within the house, knowing by former experience that Malcolm's shealing was tenanted by myriads of nocturnal insects which, like the ancient Britons, "*feri hospitibus*," would have left me but little quiet during the night. The last time I had slept there, all the fleas in the shealing, "*novitatis avidi*," had issued out, and falling on the body of the unlucky stranger, had attacked me in such numbers, that unanimity only was wanting in their proceedings to have enabled them to carry me off bodily. Tempted by the clean

and fresh appearance of the good lady's sheets, I had trusted my tired limbs to their snowy whiteness, when, sallying forth from every crevice and every corner, thousands of these obnoxious insects had hopped on to me, to enjoy the treat of a supper of English blood. The natives of these places seem quite callous to everything of the kind.

To continue, however. After making good use of the burn that rippled along within fifty yards of the house, and having eaten a most alarming quantity of the composition called porridge, I sallied forth alone. Malcolm and his brother would fain have accompanied me, but the latter had to attend some gathering of sheep in a different direction, and Malcolm was obliged to go for the stag killed yesterday. He therefore only walked a few hundred yards up the first hill with me, in order to impress well on my recollection the different glens and burns he wished me to look at on my way to the place of rendezvous with old Donald. The sun was but a little distance above the horizon when I gained the summit of a tolerably long and steep ascent immediately behind Malcolm's house. A blackcock or two rose wild from some cairn of stones or hillock, where they had been enjoying the earliest rays of the sun, and flew back over my head to take shelter in the

scattered birch thickets near the shealing; and here and there a pack of grouse rose, alighting again before they had flown a hundred yards, as if fully understanding that grouse-shooting was not the order of the day, and, strutting along with their necks stretched up, seemed to care little for my presence. The ring-ousel flitted from rock to rock, uttering its wild and sweet note. Truly there is great enjoyment gained by the early riser; everything in nature has a pleasant aspect, and seems happy and thankful to see the light of another sun.

The great mountain to the west looked magnificent as its gray corries and cliffs were lighted up by the morning rays. A noble pile of rock and heather is that mountain, and well named Ben Mhor, or the Big Mountain—not a triton amongst minnows, but a triton amongst tritons. The golden eagle, to add grandeur to the scene, was sweeping through the sky high above me, and apparently eyeing my canine companion with mingled curiosity and appetite. Once or twice in his circles he came so near that I was half inclined to send a rifle-ball at him, but as often as I stopped my walk with this intention, the noble bird wheeled off again, and at last, remembering his breakfast hour was past, flew off in a straight line at a great height towards the loch to the north of us, where he probably

recollected having seen some dead or sickly sheep during his flight homewards the evening before.

I had several hours to spare before the time of meeting Donald, so I diverged here and there, wherever I thought it likely I should find deer, and then kept a northerly course in order to look at some burns and grassy ground near the loch, according to Malcolm's advice. The loch itself was bright and beautiful, and the small islands on it looked like emeralds set in silver. With my glass I could distinguish eight or nine wild-geese, as they ruffled the water in their morning gambols, having probably just returned from grazing on the short green grass that grew on different spots near the water's edge. These grassy places were the sites of former habitations, and were still marked by the line of crumbled walls, now the constant resort of the few wild-geese that breed every year on the lonely and unvisited islands of the loch.

Below me there was a capital flat for deer, a long sloping valley with a winding burn flowing through the middle, along the banks of which were grassy spots where they constantly fed. I searched this long and carefully with my glass, but saw nothing excepting a few small companies of sheep which were feeding in different flocks about the valley. So famous, however, was this place as the resort of

deer, that I took good care not to show myself, and crawled carefully into a hollow way, which, leading to the edge of the burn, would enable me to walk almost unseen for a long distance, and I thought that there might still be deer feeding in some bend of the watercourse, where they had escaped my search. Before I had walked many hundred yards down the course of the burn I saw such traces as convinced me they had been feeding there within a few hours; so arranging my plaid and rifle I walked stealthily and slowly onwards, expecting to see them every moment. The nature of the ground was such that I might come on them quite unperceived; the dog too showed symptoms of scenting something, putting his nose to the tracks and then looking wistfully in my face, watching every movement of my rifle. The inquiring expression of his face was perfect: whenever I stopped to look over or around some projecting angle of rock he kept his eyes fixed on my face, as if to read in it whether my search was successful or not. A deer-stalker in the situation I was in would make a good subject for a painter. I wound my way silently and slowly through the broken rock and stone which formed the bed of the burn, showing in their piled up confusion that the water must at some times rage and rush with the fury and power

of an Alpine torrent, though now it danced merrily along, rippling through the stones, and forming tiny pools here and there, where it had not strength enough to break through the accumulated sand and gravel which dammed up its feeble stream. Dressed in gray, and surrounded with gray stone on every side, I was as little conspicuous as it was possible to be, and there was just enough ripple in the stream and its thousand miniature cascades to drown the sound of my footsteps, whenever I inadvertently put my foot on any stone that grated or slipped below me. The only thing that annoyed me was an occasional sheep that would see me from the bank above, and by running off in a startled manner was likely to warn the deer, if there were any ahead of me, of the vicinity of an enemy. I had continued this course for some distance, when just as I began to propose to myself turning off in order to cross the valley to look over the next height, and had made up my mind that the deer whose recent traces I had seen must have slipped away unobserved,—just then, on turning a corner, I caught a momentary glimpse of the hind-quarters of one of the wished-for animals walking slowly round a turn in the burn. I stopped, fearing they had seen or heard me, and I expected to see them leap out of the hollow

and make away across the valley ; but not seeing this happen, I walked carefully on, and came in view of nine deer, hinds and calves, who were feeding quietly on a little piece of table-land close to the burn. I also saw the long ears of another appearing beyond and above the rest, evidently being on the look-out. They seemed to have no suspicion of an enemy, and when they stopped to gaze about them their heads were turned more towards the plain around than to the course of the burn. The sentry too was seemingly occupied with looking out in every direction excepting where I was. They were not more than two hundred yards off, and I judged that by advancing quickly the moment that they turned the next corner, I should be able to get unperceived within forty or fifty yards. The single hind had disappeared too, having gone over a small rise. I put on a new copper cap, and felt sure of an easy shot : the dog, though he did not see the deer, perfectly understood what was going on, and seemed afraid to breathe lest he should be heard. Amongst the herd were two fine barren hinds, both in capital condition. I did not care which of the two I might kill, but determined to have one, and was already beginning to reckon on Donald's delight at my luck in getting a fine hind as well as the

stag I had killed yesterday. All the hinds had now gone out of sight, and I moved on. At that very moment the sentry hind, a long-legged, ragged, donkey-like beast, came back to the mound where she had been before, and her sharp eyes instantly detected me. Never did unlucky wight, caught in the very act of doing what he least wished should be known, feel, or I dare say look, so taken aback as I was. I stood motionless for a moment, hoping that even HER eyesight might be deceived by my gray dress, but it was too late: giving a snort of alarm, she was instantly out of sight. I ran forwards, trusting to be in time for a running shot at some straggler, and came in view of the whole troop galloping away, a tolerably long shot off, but still within range, and affording a fair broadside mark as they went along in single file to gain the more level ground. I of course pulled up, and took a deliberate aim at one of the fat hinds. She afforded me a fair enough chance, but I saw, the moment I pulled the trigger, that I had missed her. The ball struck and splintered a rock, and must have passed within a very few inches of the top of her shoulder. I saw my error, which was that, miscalculating the distance, I had fired a little too high. However, it was too late to remedy it; so I stood quietly watching with

a kind of vague hope that my ball might have passed through her shoulder, though in reality I was sure this was not the case. They never stopped till they reached the very summit of one of the heights that inclosed the valley, and then they all halted in a group for two or three minutes, standing in clear and strong relief between me and the sky. After looking back for a short time towards the point of alarm, they disappeared over the top of the hill, and I reloaded my rifle, and then went to examine the exact spot where my ball had struck. Judging from the height it was from the ground, I saw the hind had had a very narrow escape, and muttered to myself "Not a bad shot after all, though unlucky; well, I'm glad it was not a fine stag—never mind the hinds." It's pleasant to find consolation—"rebus in adversis;" my dog in the meantime scented about a good deal, and seemed to wonder that I had missed.

I now turned off out of my stony path, and walked across a long tract of easy ground. There were several likely spots in my way, but no deer were to be found; and an hour before my time I arrived at the trysting-place, which was a peculiarly shaped large rock, standing in the midst of a great extent of ground covered with gray stones and rocks of a similar description, but all much

smaller. The rock itself rejoiced in a Gaelic name, signifying the "Devil's Stone." It was a curious spot,—a wide and gentle slope of a hill perfectly covered with these gray stones, looking as if they had dropped in a shower from the clouds. They ended abruptly near the foot of the hill, and formed almost a straight line, as if some giant workman had done his best to clear the remainder of the slope, and had picked all the stones off that part, as children do off a grass-field. Upwards, towards the top of the hill, they increased, if possible, in number, and the summit appeared like one mass of rock. Through all this desolation of stone there were several strips of heather, or withered-looking grass, not much wider, however, than footpaths. They served as passes for any sheep and deer which might fancy journeying through them.

I reached my point of rendezvous, and sat down to wait patiently for Donald, with my face turned in the direction whence he was to arrive. I knew that, unless detained by any quite unforeseen accident, he would arrive rather before than after his time, as he was to bring me something in the shape of luncheon, the liquid part of which I was confident he would not forget.

I waited some time in this solitude, without hearing or seeing any living creature to enliven the

dreary landscape before me, with the exception of a pair of ravens who passed at no great height above me, uttering their harsh croaks of ill omen as they winged their way in a direct course, to feast probably on the remains of some dead sheep or deer.

My attention was suddenly roused, however, by hearing a couple of shots in quick succession, the sound coming from the direction in which I expected Donald. As the reports did not appear to be at any great distance, I rose with the intention of going to meet him ; though I could not understand what he was shooting at, it being quite against both his and my ideas of propriety that he should hunt the very ground over which I intended to beat home-wards. On second thoughts, I fancied that he had fired off his gun to warn me of his approach ; but, just as I was passing these things over in my head, I saw a stag of good size come in view from the direction in which I had heard the shots. Down I dropped instantly behind a rock, as the deer was coming straight towards me. As he approached, I saw that the poor beast was hard hit. One of his forelegs was broken, and swinging about in a miserable manner, and he had also one of his horns broken off a few inches above his head ; altogether he seemed in a most pitiable state.

Before he came within two hundred yards of me he turned off, and I watched him as he scrambled along on three legs painfully and slowly, stopping frequently to look back, or to smell at the blood that was trickling down his sides. I could plainly see that he was also struck somewhere about the middle of his body, as well as on the horn and leg, and was now bleeding fast. It then occurred to me that Donald had fallen in with a lame stag, and had thought it best to do what he could towards killing him with my gun. Bullets he always took with him by my orders. The stag continued his painful march, and I would have given much to have been within reach to put an end to the poor brute's misery. He twice lay down on a grassy spot amongst the rocks, having first looked anxiously and fearfully round him; but seemingly the attitude of lying was more painful to him than moving slowly on. I remembered then a theory of Donald's, that a deer never lies down when shot through the liver, but continues moving, or at any rate standing, till he dies. How far this opinion was correct I never had a good opportunity of proving. The deer before me, having found that lying down gave him no relief, continued moving, but still slowly and with evident difficulty. Once he stopped and stood in a pitiful attitude, trembling

all over, and moving his head up and down as if oppressed with deadly sickness. After this he seemed to recover slightly, and, standing erect, gazed with care and anxiety in every direction; then, as if determined to make one more effort for his life, set off in a broken trot. He had been winding about amongst the rocks all the time I had been watching him, seldom more than two hundred yards from me, and sometimes so near that I was half tempted to try a shot at him; but I was always in hopes of getting within surer range, and did not fire. He now trotted off about three hundred yards, where there was a small black pool of water. Into this he went; it did not at first reach higher than his knees. Just then Donald appeared in view, coming slowly and cautiously over the hill, and leading a pointer in a string. I saw that the dog was tracking the deer. It was a large powerful dog, of great size and strength—one of the finest, if not quite the finest built dog of the kind that I had ever possessed or seen. Having been at the death of one or two deer, he had taken a mighty fancy to the scent of a bleeding stag, and tracked true and keenly. I sat quiet to watch him and the old Highlander, as they came slowly but surely on the track, with both their noses to the ground; Donald hunting low, in order to be sure that the dog was still right,

which he could tell pretty well by the occasional spots of blood on the gray stones, though the ground was too hard most of the way to show the mark of the foot. Now and then they seemed quite thrown out for a minute or so ; this I saw was generally occasioned by Donald's want of judgment : the dog, though he strained on the string, kept the track wonderfully well in every turn. The poor object of their chase, when he first saw his enemies appear, gave a sudden start, and seemed inclined to make off ; but on second thoughts he stopped short again, and, lowering his head and neck, crouched in the water, as if trusting to the surrounding rocks for concealment ; and there the poor animal remained, with stooping horns, perfectly motionless, but evidently with every nerve and sense on the alert, listening for the nearer approach of his enemies. For my own part, I became quite interested in watching Donald and the dog ; I knew that the stag was safely ours, as he could not leave the pool without coming into full view, and having to depend on his speed for safety, which in his enfeebled state was the last thing he would like to do. Donald looked anxiously round him sometimes, as if he hoped to see me, and as if he expected to hear my rifle every moment, since he was well aware that our time of meeting was past, and that I was pretty

sure not to be far off. When he came near the "Devil's Stone" he checked the dog, and came to a determined halt, hesitating whether to continue tracking the stag, or to wait for my appearance and assistance; he took a long look too at the country far beyond where the animal really was. It was amusing to see the old fellow, as he sat within eighty yards of me, perfectly unconscious that the stag was so near him, and that I was still nearer. The whole thing, too, showed the great necessity of always having a good tracking dog out when deer-stalking; for here was a mortally-struck stag lying concealed, where a dozen men might have passed within a few yards without seeing him. I thought it time to finish the business, and gave a low whistle to warn Donald of my neighbourhood before I stirred, as I thought it not at all unlikely that he would fire blindly at the first moving thing he saw amongst the rocks in his present excited state. He started and stared round him. I saw that the deer only crouched the lower, and would not move; so, whistling again, I stood up. "The Lord keep us, sir, but you flegged me just awful!" said Donald. "But did your Honour see a stag come this way?" I told him that I had, and that he had passed on; but I did not say how far he had gone. The old man was annoyed in no slight degree at the information; and

on my questioning him how he had got at the deer, etc., he told me that, as he came to meet me, he had seen a crippled stag coming slowly over the ground exactly towards him; and that having stooped down and loaded the gun he carried as quickly as he could, he had waited till the stag passed within twenty yards of him; that he then fired both barrels, one at his head and neck; that one ball had broken off a portion of the animal's horn, while the other had passed through his body, tumbling him over for a moment; but that he had quickly recovered and made off in my direction, and was probably now in the burn over the next hill. "But you are aye smiling, sir; and I ken weel that you've seen more of the brute than you tell me." I told the old man exactly where he was; and having made him quite understand the very rock he was behind, I gave him the rifle to finish the work he had commenced, while I sat down with the two dogs in full view of the pool, in order to keep the attention of the stag occupied.

"Now then, Donald, take care; don't be in a hurry, and hit him in the heart or the head."

"No fear, no fear; if I put out," said Donald, "ye needna mind, the beast is as gude as killed already."

Then taking a prodigious spoonful of snuff to

clear his brain, and divesting himself of his game-bag and other encumbrances, he set off. He reached a mound within thirty yards of the stag, and lying flat on his stomach, with his rifle resting on the bank, he aimed long and steadily; then, with sundry kicks and contortions, screwing himself into an attitude that pleased him more, he took another aim, and then a good strong pull at the trigger—but in vain, as he had not cocked the rifle. Without taking it off the rest over the bank, he pulled back the hammer and fired instantly, missing the stag entirely. Donald was too astonished to move; but not so the stag, who jumped up and made off—going, however, so stifly and lamely, that I saw the dogs must bring him to immediately. So I let them go, and in a very short time they had the poor beast on the ground, and were both fixed on him like leeches, the bull-dog on his throat, and the pointer worrying at his shoulder.

“Bravo, Donald!—well missed!” I could not help calling out as I passed him, running as hard as I could to help the dogs. The old man was not long in joining me; and the dogs were soon got off. The stag was bled, and then examined all over to see where he had been struck.

“’Deed, sir,” said Donald, pointing to the rifle, “she is as gleg and kittle to handle as”——

Here he paused as if at a dead loss for a simile ; which I was obliged to help him to at last by suggesting, " As your own wife, Donald." At which he indulged in a low inward chuckle and a pinch of snuff, without, however, denying the " soft impeachment."

On looking at the stag, we found that he had evidently been very lately shot at, and that one of his forelegs was broken above the knee—the bone smashed entirely, and the leg hanging on by the skin, which would have soon worn through ; the animal, having lost the incumbrance of the broken limb, would soon, if left in quiet, have entirely recovered. We prepared our game for being " left till called for," and sat down to our luncheon. My account to Donald of the death of my other stag was interrupted by a most desperate battle between the dogs, who had fallen out over the dead body ; and being pretty well matched in size and courage, we had great difficulty in reducing them to order, and compelling them to keep the peace.

I had a pleasant though not very bloody afternoon's shooting going home, killing seven brace of wild-flying grouse, a mallard, and two blackcocks. The night had set in before we were half way through the woods in which the last two or three miles of our road lay ; we could hear numberless

owls hooting and calling on the tops of old larch-trees. Everything else was as still as death.

“’Deed, sir, that’s no canny!” exclaimed my companion, as an owl with peculiar vigour of lungs uttered his wild cry close to us, and then flitting past our faces, alighted on the opposite side of the avenue we were walking along, and recommenced his song of bad omen. “If it wasn’t so dark, I’d empty the gun into his ugly craig.” However, as it *was* so dark, the owl escaped being sacrificed to Donald’s dislike this time; and we soon reached the house, where the comforts of my own dressing-room were by no means unacceptable after so long an absence from razor, brushes, etc.

