

WINTER SKETCHES.



CHAPTER XXXIV.

Grouse ; Hardiness of—Difference of Climate in Morayshire—Migratory habits of Partridges—Grubs, etc., destroyed by Pheasants—Ptarmigan—Ptarmigan-shooting during Winter—An Expedition to the Mountains—Early start—Tracks of Otters—Otter-hunting—Stags—Herons—Golden-eyes—Wild-cat—Mallards—Tracks of Deer—Gray Crows—Eagle—Shepherd's hut—Braxy Mutton—Ascent of the Mountain—Ptarmigan—Change in the weather—Dangerous situation—Violent Snowstorm—Return home—Wild-duck shooting—Flapper-shooting.

GROUSE, although frequenting high and exposed situations, are perhaps less affected by a moderate fall of snow than partridges or any other game. A hardy and a mountain-bred bird, the grouse cares little for cold ; and although the hillside may be covered with snow, by digging and burrowing he soon arrives at the heather, and thus obtains both food and shelter ; and in weather which makes the partridge cower and mope most disconsolately under any shelter it can find, the grouse-cock, with his well-clothed legs and feet, struts and crows on

the cold snow apparently in full enjoyment of life and health. In this county of Moray the difference of climate between the hillside and the flat lands near the salt-water bays is very great—greater, indeed, than would be supposed. Long after every trace of snow has disappeared from the fields near the Bay of Findhorn, the country four or five miles to the southward, inland, is still deeply covered with it. The large fir plantations certainly create a mildness in the air which melts the snow in their immediate vicinity; but beyond the extent of their influence the ground becomes colder and colder, and the snow deeper and deeper, every mile that we recede from the sea.

In October the summits of the higher mountains are generally clothed in snow, and frequently hills of a very moderate height are partially covered with it. As soon as this occurs, a great many partridges, black-game, and wild-fowl of all descriptions migrate to their winter quarters.

Partridges are far more migratory in their habits than is generally supposed. Every winter several large unbroken coveys betake themselves on the first approach of storm and cold to the quiet and warm fields in the lower part of the country; and, when spring returns, pairs of partridges appear here and there, on every little patch of cultivated ground

on the moors. These birds being almost entirely granivorous, always select cultivated districts—and indeed they only thrive where corn grows; but their actual consumption of corn is not great, for a partridge is a moderate eater, and in part feeds on the seeds of grasses and many weeds as well as on corn. I am confident, as I have before stated, that most, if not all, granivorous birds amply repay the farmer for their food by the quantity of weeds they destroy during a great part of the year. The pheasant is in a great degree an insectivorous bird, and feeds more on grubs, caterpillars, and other insects, than on corn; thereby relieving the farmer from a whole host of enemies whom he could in no other way get rid of.

During storms the ptarmigan burrow deep under the snow in search of shelter and food. These birds seldom descend far down the mountains, even in the severest weather. When only the summits are covered, they descend to the edge of the snow; but when the whole mountain is white, they do not leave it for the lower hills, but find what shelter they can by burrowing. Ptarmigan-shooting during winter is a most laborious sport, and is frequently attended with no small risk, owing to the snow concealing the numerous clefts and dangerous places which intersect the heights where these

birds abound. The days, too, being short, and the changes of weather frequent, the ptarmigan-shooter must work carefully and quickly.

Some few years back, when living in the north of Scotland, I was anxious to get a few ptarmigan in their beautiful winter plumage, which is as pure a white as the snow itself. It was late in the season, and the ground was covered with snow; but as there had been a few days' frost the walking was by no means bad; so I determined to start in spite of the cold and snow, and the grumbings of old Donald, who had but little inclination for the pursuit.

Our plan was to reach a shepherd's house, situated about ten or twelve miles — that is to say, about four hours' easy walking — up the course of the river; there we were to sleep, and to attack the ptarmigan on the following day — the mountain where I expected to find them being situated near the shepherd's house. At the first break of day Donald and I left the house, accompanied by one quiet dog, whose personal inclinations tended rather to otter-hunting and such like pursuits than to grouse-shooting; but his nose was so good and his intelligence so great that in cover-shooting and rough work he was invaluable. Pointers would have been useless for ptarmigan in

the then state of the ground ; and I also thought it not unlikely that we might fall in with the track of an otter or wild-cat during our walk up the river side.

As soon as we emerged from the woods a beautiful sight opened to us ; the morning sun, although not yet visible, tinged the mountain tops to the west, their snow-covered summits shining with all the varied colours of the rainbow : soon, however, the bright sun of a frosty winter's day rose behind us, making the old birch-trees which grew on the slopes above the river throw out their dark shadows on the snow. Here and there a roebuck or two "*stotted*" (to use Donald's favourite expression) over the turf wall into the shelter of the fir-woods, out of which we had just come ; the grouse-cocks were crowing on the juniper-covered hillocks, which showed their lively green above the surrounding snow ; and the blackcocks launched themselves off the birch-trees, where they seemed to have been awaiting the first rays of the morning sun. Everything around us was full of beauty ; and dreary as a mountainous country is when covered with snow, still it is magnificent, varied too as it now was by wood and water and numerous living creatures, all appearing to be in as full enjoyment of life as if it had been a genial

morning in May instead of a most orthodox Christmas-like day. The gray crows were just going forth in pairs from the woods, calling to each other with loud ringing cries, and all bending their way straight to one point, where, as we afterwards found, two drowned sheep had been cast ashore in a bend of the river.

We walked on, and soon came across the tracks of two or three otters, where they had been going in and out of the water on their way up stream, after fishing in the deep pools where the two waters met near the house. These pools are favourite resting-places for salmon and sea-trout, and therefore are sure to be frequented by the otters.

Opposite to a strip of birch-trees one of the largest otters seemed to have left the river and to have made for a well-known cairn of stones, where I had before found both marten-cat and otter. Half way up the brae he had entered a kind of cleft or hole, made by a small stream of water, which at this spot worked itself out of the depth of the earth. "He'll no stop in this," said Donald; "there's a vent twenty yards above, and I ken weel that he'll no stop till he is in the dry cairn forty yards higher up the brae." Nor was the old man far wrong, for we found where the otter had squeezed himself up to the surface of the ground

again, leaving a small round hole in the snow. We carefully stopped up both entrances to this covered way, and then Donald went on with the dog to dislodge him from the cairn, having first given me the strongest injunctions to "*stand quite privately*" (*i.e.* quietly) a few yards from the hole which we had just stopped up. The dog at first seemed little inclined to leave me, but presently understanding the service upon which he was to be employed, he went off with Donald with right good will, putting his nose every now and then into the tracks of the otter in the snow, as if to ascertain how long it was since the animal had been there.

They soon arrived at the cairn, which was of no great extent, and not composed of very heavy stones. After walking round it carefully, to see whether there were any tracks farther on, Donald sent on the dog, who almost immediately began to bark, and scratch at a part of the cairn. Donald was soon with him, and employed in moving the stones, having laid down his gun for that purpose, knowing that the otter was quite sure to make straight for the place where I was standing, if he could dislodge him. Presently the dog made a headlong dive into the snow and stones, but drew back as quickly with a sharp cry. In he went again, however, his blood now well up; but the

otter's black head appeared at a different aperture, and now dog and man were dancing and tumbling about amongst the snow and stones like lunatics,—the otter darting from place to place, and showing his face first in one corner and then in another.

Donald found this would not do ; so he again commenced moving the stones. Presently he called out to me, “Keep private, sir ! keep private ! the brute is coming your gate !” *Private* I had kept from the moment he had stationed me, till my fingers and feet were nearly frozen. Donald seized the dog and held him to prevent his running in the way. All this passed in a moment, and I saw the snow heaving up above the otter, who was working through it like a mole, assisted, probably, by the heather, which prevented it from being caked down in a solid mass, as would have been the case on a smooth field. I knew that he would appear at the hole which we had stopped, and therefore I did not risk a shot at him.

He worked on until he was close to the hole, when he emerged quietly and silently, and crept towards the well-known place of refuge. On finding it completely stopped up, the countenance of the poor animal assumed a most bewildered expression of astonishment and fear ; and lifting himself up on his hind legs, he looked round to

ascertain what had happened. On seeing me he made off towards the river, with as long leaps as the snow would allow him ; and as it was tolerably hard, he got on pretty quickly till my charge of shot put an end to his journey.

The report of the gun started two fine stags, who had been feeding along the course of a small open rill which ran into the river just above where we were ; and I was astonished to see the power with which these two great animals galloped up the hill, although they sank deep at every stride. When half way up, they halted to look at us, and stood beautifully defined on the white snow ; they then trotted quietly off till we lost sight of them over the summit of the hill. Donald in the meantime had carefully concealed the otter under the snow (marking the place by a small pyramid of stones), as I intended to have him skinned on our return home.

The lakes and the still pools being frozen, we saw several herons standing in their usual and characteristic attitude, waiting patiently in some shallow running water for any unwary trout that might pass within reach of their unerring bills ; and here and there a heron, who appeared to have made his morning meal, was standing, as quietly and as unsubstantial-looking as his own shadow,

perched on one foot on a stone in the middle of the stream. A golden-eye or two were diving earnestly and quickly in the quieter parts of the river, taking wing only on my near approach, and after flying some distance up the stream, coming back again over my head, making with their rapid pinions the peculiar clanging noise which distinguishes their flight from that of any other duck. They passed me unmolested, for had we killed them they would have been useless. Indeed no diving duck is fit to eat, with the exception perhaps of the pochard and scaup; and even these, although I have heard them much praised, are far inferior to mallard, widgeon, or teal, which are, in my opinion, the only British ducks worth killing for the larder.

On leaving the birch-woods the country became wild and dreary, and frequently we had no small difficulty in making our way along the trackless snow. The otters had turned off here and there from the river, and we saw no more of their footsteps. A wild-cat had been hunting at one part of the banks, but had crossed where some stones raised above the water had enabled her to do so tolerably dry-footed. Although not so unwilling to get wet as the domestic cat, this animal appears to avoid the water as much as

possible, though I have known instances of their swimming rivers.

“We must try to get a brace of grouse or something to take up to the shepherd’s,” said my companion, “as you’re no that fond of braxy, sir, and I doubt if we shall get any other ‘ve-ni-son’ there the night.” “Indeed I am *not* fond of braxy,” was my answer; “and a grouse or two we must get.” But we had first to eat our luncheon, having breakfasted hastily at a very early hour, and we determined to perform this ceremony at a spring about a mile ahead of us; and, as I remembered having frequently seen a pair or two of ducks about it in frosty weather, when we drew near the place we advanced with great care, keeping ourselves well concealed till within twenty yards of the spot. “Now, then, Donald, you look over the bank, and see if any ducks are feeding on the grass about the well. If there are, you shoot at them on the ground, and I will take them flying.” Donald wormed himself on a little, regardless of filling his pockets with snow, and, having looked cautiously over, beckoned to me to come nearer, which I did. “There are six bonny gray dukes feeding about the well, sir; three drakes and three dukes.” “Take care then, Donald, and get two or three of them in a line

before you fire." After waiting a little with his gun pointed towards the place, Donald fired one barrel, and then as they rose the other. The latter killed none—"ut mos fuit." However, as only four rose (two of which, both mallards, fell to my two barrels), I presumed that he had done some execution with his first shot; and sure enough he had riddled two most effectually.

The place where the ducks had been feeding was a bright green spot in the midst of the snow, caused by the spreading of the waters of a fine unfreezing spring. Around it, also, were the tracks of several deer who had been cropping the green herbage, and had evidently sunk to their knees at every step which they made in the soft ground. Two snipes also rose while we were picking up our ducks.

As we ascended higher the river grew more rapid, and was the only object in our view which was not perfectly white. Having finished our frugal luncheon, and swallowed a modicum of whisky, we again "took the road," as Donald was pleased to express it, although road there was none.

The grouse had entirely disappeared, and we saw no living creature excepting a pair of gray crows, who alighted under the bank of the river. "There will be more of those fellows there," said

I. "'Deed ay, sir! do you mind those that we saw at first starting? they all came up this gate, and we've seen none of them. I'd like weel to get a good shot at them." We therefore went quietly on to the place, the crows being quite concealed from us by the bank. On looking over it cautiously, there they were, indeed, a whole flock of those most mischievous of all vermin. "Now then, Donald, take care, and kill all you can," said I. "'Deed ay," was his answer, with a quiet chuckle. The next moment our four charges of shot were driving through the midst of the crows, and such a *family shot* at these cunning birds was not often made, as we killed or maimed no less than seven. But the next instant, to our mortification, a magnificent white-tailed eagle rose not twenty yards from us, out of the bed of the river, where he had been feeding on another drowned sheep which had grounded there. He was so gorged that he could scarcely get clear of the banks. After a few wheels, however, he got well launched, and was soon wending his way towards the cliffs of the mountain ahead of us. Donald almost wept with vexation, but for my own part I did not regret the escape of the noble bird so much.

Turning round a bend of the river, we came

within sight of our resting-place for the night, but it was still a long distance off. On the left, rising with a clear outline in the bright sky, was the lofty mountain where we intended to try for ptarmigan. The snow, however, looked so deep on it that we began to think we might as well have stopped at home. But I was very anxious to get a few birds in their pure winter plumage, and determined not to give in, if any chance of success offered itself. As we approached nearer to the shepherd's hut, the hillsides, which were covered with fine old weeping birch, presented a most beautiful appearance; and here we saw a great many blackcocks, either perched on the leafless branches of the birch, or trying to make a scanty meal of the juniper berries, which they contrived to get at here and there, where the snow was not so deep. I shot a couple of fine old birds as they flew over our heads from one side of the river to the other; and Donald missed several more, as shooting flying is decidedly not his forte.

Our approach had been observed from a distance, and the shepherd was ready to receive us. His wife, "on hospitable cares intent," hurried to and fro, piling peats and fir-roots on the fire. I had got wet at the spring where we killed the ducks, and my trousers, higher than my knees,

were as hard as boards with the intense frost that had come on as the evening set in. However, "Igne levatur hiems"—I was soon thawed to a proper consistency, and immediately began to superintend the cooking of some of our game. In as short a time as possible a stew worthy of Meg Merrilies herself was prepared; but with true Highland taste Donald preferred, or pretended to prefer, some "braxy" mutton which the shepherd's wife set before him, the odour of which was enough to breed the plague or the cholera anywhere but in a Highland hut. "'Deed, your Honour," said the shepherd, "it's no that bad, considering we did not find the sheep for some days after it died, and the corbies had pulled it about a bit. The weather was gey an' wet at the time, or it would not have had such a high flavour; but we steeped it a day or so, to get rid of the greenness of the meat." I thought to myself that, "*considering*" all this, together with the additional fact that the sheep had died of a kind of inward mortification, the bowels of Donald and the shepherd must be stronger even than the "Dura illia messorum" which we read of at school.

Our host was tolerably confident that we should manage to get a few ptarmigan if we started early, so as to make the most of the day, and if the snow

continued hard. "But for a' that, it will be no easy travelling," was his final remark.

Before daylight I was up, and making my toilette by the light of a splinter of bog fir. The operation did not take long, nor did it extend beyond the most simple and necessary acts. The "gude wife" had prepared me rather an elaborate breakfast of porridge, tea, and certain undeniably good barley and oat cakes, flanked by the remains of my supper, eggs, etc. As Donald seemed not to like the expedition, I left him at the hut, with strict injunctions to procure enough black game or grouse to form our supper and next day's breakfast. The shepherd took down a single-barrel gun, of prodigious length and calibre, tied together here and there with pieces of string; and having twisted his plaid round him, and lit his pipe, was ready to accompany me. So, having put up some luncheon in case we were out late, we started.

The sun was not up as we crossed the river on the stepping-stones which the shepherd had placed for that purpose, but very soon the mountain-tops were gilded by its rays, and before long it was shining brightly on our backs as we toiled up the steep hillside. My companion, who knew exactly which was the easiest line to take, led the way; deeply covered with snow as the ground was, I

should without his guidance have found it impossible to make my way up to the heights to which we were bound. "I'm no just liking the look of the day either, sir," was his remark, "but still I think it will hold up till near nicht; we should be in a bonny pass if it came on to drift while we were up yonder." "A bonny pass, indeed!" was my inward ejaculation. However, depending on his skill in the weather, and not expecting myself that any change would take place till nightfall, although an ominous-looking cloud concealed the upper part of the mountain, I went on with all confidence.

Our object was to reach a certain shoulder of the hill, not far from the summit, from which the snow had drifted when it first fell, leaving a tolerably-sized tract of bare stones, where we expected to find the ptarmigan basking in the bright winter sun. It was certainly hard work, and we felt little of the cold, as we laboured up the steep hill. Perseverance meets with its reward; and we did at last reach the desired spot, and almost immediately found a considerable pack of ptarmigan, of which we managed to kill four brace before they finally took their flight round a distant shoulder of the hill where it was impossible to follow them. An eagle dashed down

at the flock of birds as they were just going out of our sight, but, as we saw him rise upwards again empty handed, he must have missed his aim.

By this time it was near mid-day, and the clouds were gathering on the mountain-top, and gradually approaching us. We had taken little note of the weather during our pursuit of the birds, but it was now forced on our attention by a keen blast of wind which suddenly swept along the shoulder of the mountain, here and there lifting up the dry snow in clouds. "We must make our way homewards at once," said I. "'Deed, ay! it will no be a canny night," was the shepherd's answer. Just as we were leaving the bare stones a brace of ptarmigan rose, one of which I knocked down: the bird fell on a part of the snow which sloped downwards towards a nearly perpendicular cliff of great height: the slope of the snow was not very great, so I ran to secure the bird, which was fluttering towards the precipice: the shepherd was some little distance behind me, lighting his everlasting pipe; but when he saw me in pursuit of the ptarmigan he shouted at me to stop: not exactly understanding him, I still ran after the bird, when suddenly I found the snow giving way with me, and sliding "en masse" towards the precipice. There was no time to hesitate, so, springing back

with a power that only the emergency of the case could have given me, I struggled upwards again towards my companion. How I managed to escape I cannot tell, but in less time than it takes to write the words I had retraced my steps several yards, making use of my gun as a stick to keep myself from sliding back again towards the edge of the cliff. The shepherd was too much alarmed to move, but stood for a moment speechless; then recollecting himself, he rushed forward to help me, holding out his long gun for me to take hold of. For my own part, I had no time to be afraid, and in a few moments was on terra firma, while a vast mass of snow which I had set in motion rolled like an avalanche over the precipice, carrying with it the unfortunate ptarmigan.

I cannot describe my sensations on seeing the danger which I had so narrowly escaped: however, no time was to be lost, and we descended the mountain at a far quicker rate than we had gone up it. The wind rose rapidly, moaning mournfully through the passes of the mountain, and frequently carrying with it dense showers of snow. The thickest of these showers, however, fell above where we were, and the wind still came from behind us, though gradually veering round in a manner which plainly showed us that it would be right ahead before we

reached home. Every moment brought us lower, and we went merrily on, though with certain anxious glances occasionally to windward. Nor was our alarm unfounded, for just as we turned an angle of the mountain, which brought us within view of the shepherd's house perched on the opposite hillside, with a good hour's walk and the river between us and it, we were met by a blast of wind and a shower of snow, half drifting and half falling from the clouds, which took away our breath, and nearly blew us both backwards, shutting out the view of everything ten yards from our faces.

We stopped and looked at each other. "This is geyan sharp," said the shepherd, "but we mustn't lose a moment's time, or we shall be smothered in the drift; so come on, sir:" and on we went. Bad as it was, we did not dare to stop for its abating, and, having fortunately seen the cottage for a moment, we knew that our course for the present lay straight down the mountain. After struggling on for some time we came to a part of the ground which rather puzzled us, as, instead of being a steep slope, it was perfectly flat; a break, however, in the storm allowed us to see for a moment some of the birch-trees on the opposite side of the river, which we judged were not far from our destination. The river itself we could not see, but the glimpse

we had caught of the trees guided us for another start, and we went onwards as rapidly as we could until the storm again closed round us, with such violence that we could scarcely stand upright against it. We began now at times to hear the river, and we made straight for the sound, knowing that it must be crossed before we could reach home, and hoping to recognise some bend or rock in it which would guide us on our way.

At last we came to the flat valley through which the stream ran; but here the drift was tremendous, and it was with the utmost difficulty that we got to the water's edge. When there, we were fairly puzzled by the changed aspect of everything; but suddenly the evening became lighter and the drifting snow not quite so dense. We saw that we should soon be able to ascertain where we were, so we halted for a minute or two, stamping about to keep ourselves from freezing. My poor dog immediately crouched at our feet, and, curling himself up, laid down; in a few moments he was nearly covered with the snow: but the storm was evidently ceasing, at any rate for a short time, and very soon a small bit of blue sky appeared overhead, but in a moment it was again concealed by the flying shower. The next time, however, that the blue sky appeared, it was for a longer period, and the snow entirely

ceased, allowing us to see our exact position; indeed we were very nearly opposite the house, and within half a mile of it. The river had to be crossed, and it was impossible to find the stepping-stones: but no time was to be lost, as a fresh drift began to appear to windward; so in we went, and dashed through the stream, which was not much above knee-deep, excepting in certain spots, which we contrived to avoid. The poor dog was most unwilling at first to rise from his resting-place, but followed us well when once up.

We soon made our way to the house, and got there just as another storm came on, which lasted till after dark, and through which, in our tired state, we never could have made our way. Donald and the shepherd's family were in a state of great anxiety about us, knowing that there would have been no possible means of affording us assistance had we been bewildered or wearied out upon the mountain. The shepherd himself was fairly knocked up, and could scarcely be prevailed upon to take either food or drink, or even to put off his frozen clothes, before flinging himself on his bed. For my own part I soon became as comfortable as possible, and slept as soundly and dreamlessly as such exercise only can make one do. I must candidly confess, however, that I made an inward vow

against ptarmigan-shooting again upon snow-covered mountains.

No person who has not been out in a snow-storm on lofty and exposed ground can form an idea of its force, and the difficulty there is in ploughing through the drifts and deep places ; I certainly had no conception of what it was until that day. A change of weather came on during the night, and by noon the next day all was again bright and clear, and we reached home with little difficulty. The wind and drift had been much less severe near the house, and the tops of the trees were still covered with masses of snow, which the wind had not been powerful enough to dislodge.

Before the ice and snow break up on the higher grounds of the river there is generally plenty of wild-fowl shooting about the open pools near the sea. At the commencement of snow the birds are usually tame enough to make the sport good, and with the assistance of my retriever I often bring home a heavy bagful of ducks, etc. ; but without a retriever, and a good one too, wild-duck shooting is utterly useless anywhere.

In wild-fowl shooting more than in any other kind of sporting, a perfect knowledge of the ground and of the different haunts of the birds is indispensable. The sportsman must make himself

acquainted with their feeding-places, their drinking-places, their resting-places, and in fact with all their habits, at all hours and seasons, and during all changes of the weather: without this knowledge, which can only be acquired by experience and careful observation, the wild-duck shooter will brave the winter's cold and wind in vain.

A good sportsman, as regards other game, may live for many a long month in a country abounding with ducks without ever seeing one within shot. Continually when I ask people about the wild-ducks in any particular neighbourhood, the answer I get is, "Oh, yes! there are plenty of ducks, but they always keep out at sea, and never come within reach." Now if there are plenty of ducks out at sea, it is a matter beyond all doubt that at certain hours there are plenty of ducks feeding inland; and about the time when my informant is dressing for *his* dinner, the wild-ducks are flying to and fro in search of *theirs* in the stubble-fields, which they invariably do as soon as the sun sets, and the fields are deserted by the workmen and others.

As no bird is so easily scared from its usual haunts as the wild-duck, all long and random shots ought to be avoided, as tending to frighten away the birds and to spoil all chance for some time to come in that spot. Ducks, too, are capricious, and

changes of wind and weather induce them to fly in different directions and to feed in different fields; and, as I have already said, nothing but experience and observation can teach the sportsman how to be tolerably sure of filling his bag with these wary but excellent birds.

There is one kind of wild-duck shooting which appears to me to be the very lowest of all kinds of sporting, namely, that which is usually called "flapper-shooting," which means murdering large numbers of young ducks by dint of dogs, guns, sticks, etc., at a time of the year when nine out of ten of these birds cannot fly, and are utterly helpless and unable to escape. A vast number of half-fledged birds may be slaughtered in this manner, but they are useless when obtained. For my own part I would quite as soon go out to kill young grouse in June or July before they could fly; nor do I see that killing "flappers" is at all less murderous or more excusable. In fact no wild-ducks ought to be killed till they are strong enough on the wing to fly easily and quickly; nor are they worth killing for the larder until they have fed for some time in the stubble-fields, for till then their flesh is as muddy and soft as that of a coot or moorhen.