

WILD DUCK SHOOTING ON THE BORDER.



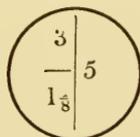
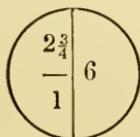
TRETCHING down to the Solway between Criffel and the lower range of hills which, finishing in Cairntable, divide Ayrshire from the Galloways, are here and there, every half a dozen miles, long lying valleys, the lakes and rivers of which are the favourite resorts of wild fowl of all kinds in winter. The chief of these valleys is possibly that of the Dee. a totally different river, however, from that which rises amongst the Cairngorm mountains, and flows through Kincardineshire and Aberdeenshire, the sister river of the Don, and not so much favoured for fertility as for fish, as an old couplet says:—

Except it be for fish or tree,
Ae mile o' Don's worth twa o' Dee.

The Kirkcudbrightshire Dee in its upper career passes through no fewer than three wide lochs, Loch Ken being the principal, and these, with lochs from which tributaries flow, such as Lochinvar (not to be confounded with Loch Inver in the far north), and the banks of and islands on them, are favourite hatching places of ducks, or, as the natives pronounce it, "jucks." It was not, therefore, to be wondered at that, in answer to my question, "What have you got to shoot?" in response to the usual wind-up Galloway invitation to "bring my gun," I should receive the reply, "A' things, but particularly 'jucks.'" My friend was just jumping into the train for Dumfries, from which station he would have to change into one for Castle Douglas, and as the guard blew his whistle he repeated the invitation more warmly—"Lots of rabbit, and plenty of other game, and with this frost the burns will just be full of jucks, and there's any amount o' snipe."

"And I could not want better," I said to myself, "in the middle of December. Hang the punt business, I'm sick of it!" and so I was heartily, for I had been skulking about the marshes at the mouth of the Leven, which empties the surplus water of Loch Lomond into the Clyde between Bowling and Dumbarton, till I had all that feeling that must belong to a sewer-rat. Lots of rabbits, lots of snipe, and lots of wild duck in the burns—

what could a man want more? Going home, I looked in at my gunmaker's, where I ordered a couple of hundred "Green Eley Twelve" empty shells, with as much powder and shot wads as would fill them, the shot, of course, being of different numbers, as the shooting was to be very mixed. Save pigeon shots, sportsmen do not care for the trouble of filling their own cartridges; but having all the requisite gear, and being fond of filling up idle moments at the work, I have always made a point of doing so myself. You can't smoke with safety, of course, when filling, but when the powder canisters have been removed you may enjoy a nice pipe turning down the rims. The cartridges filled by the gunmakers are, as a rule, of course, reliable, but you have as great confidence in yourself when working with your own ammunition as when working with your own weapons. "I have tied that fly, myself," we have heard a man say when playing a fish, "and know what I am working with." Had anything gone wrong the tacklemaker would certainly have come in for it. Getting to work, I soon turned out the lot, marking on the outside of the wads, which I prefer blank to suit my purpose, the amount of powder, and number and amount of shot in this style:—



and so on, the top figure of the fraction representing the drachms of powder, the bottom the ounces of shot, and the side one the number of the shot. Of course, for ordinary shooting, such as at grouse or partridges, you do not need to be so careful; but for mixed shooting in December, when you may change and re-change cartridges without firing, according to the chances you think you are likely to get, it is of great advantage to have all your cartridges fully marked. This was on a Friday night, and, having turned in the rims of all, I smoked a pipe as I looked over the gun in my case, saw that the breech action was working smoothly, the locks all right, and the "plungers" returning when freed by the rebounding locks, a matter of importance, the spiral springs on which they act, especially after you have been out on marshes, being very liable to go wrong. I then

brewed myself what might be called a sportsman's tumbler, and retired. Waking next morning, I found that Jack Frost, who had been flirting with the weather for a few days, had firmly established his suit, all the windows being "wreathed up" most fantastically, while the atmosphere in the room was cold enough to make anyone draw back 'neath the blankets and sing—

Up in the mornin's no for me,
 Up in the mornin' early ;
 Up in the mornin's no for me,
 I'm sure it's winter fairly.

To make up my mind, fling the clothes back, and rush to my tub was the work of a moment, and after the first shock from the water, on which was a thin skin of ice, felt as warm as if I had been transferred to a Turkish bath. Fit for anything was the form I felt in, and the only pang I had was that I would not be able to enjoy to the full my friend's invitation, and that grand, good, old roaring game, the curling. "Still," I reasoned wisely, "there will not be much more shooting worth anything after Christmas, and we may have some good strong ice in January and February, so I'll leave others to have a twist at the 'jucks,' the snipe, and the rabbits when it is going." Getting through my letters, I soon found my way to the train, and after a five hours' ride, including one spent at Dumfries in the company of some frozen-out coursers of that "leash-loving" county, I saw my host outside on a dog-cart, peering into the carriages of the train as it whirled into the little station where it was arranged he should meet me.

"Ye have brought your gun wi' ye, I hope?" was his eager remark.

"Yes, and as much ammunition as would serve the whole British army."

"I'm glad o' that, for the jucks are jist swarming—see, man, there they go," he said; "they're going down from Loch Dee to ma burns, and they'll feed on the diseased pitaties, man, for I've laid down bagfuls o' them all down the burns, and they come from all places for them. But we'll hurry on, and when they're gettin' the tea ready we'll have a shot."

"By all means," was my reply. "Let's have a shot at them; for if you don't get me one, I'll think of nothing else the whole

Sabbath day, and I suppose it wouldn't do to have a blaze at them to-morrow?"

"We have done worse many a time," was his canny remark, "but with less noise, ye ken. Guns are no safe to work wi' on the Sabbath. However, here we are at the road end, and when you have had a wee bit dram after your drive, we'll see what we can make of them." Throwing the reins to a stout young fellow who rushed from the stables, my host, who was a strong, burly, big, Kirkcudbrightshire farmer, led me by the arm inside, where blazed a rousing fire, the glow of which was reflected from the tea-things, specially laid, I could observe, for my reception, and, getting out the bottle and some glasses from a cupboard, poured out a "caulker" of as good Scotch as ever the distiller's worm worked in. In the next few seconds I slipped the gun out of its cover, having left the case at home for sake of handiness, my host took down from a rack in the lobby a twelve-bore, by a local maker, which, he said, was responsible for more ducks than any other gun on Solway Side, "Jock Johnstone's Mons Meg included." Jock's Meg was a big punt "swivel," and was so named from the tradition that Threave Castle, situated in the immediate vicinity, was the place where that well-known piece of ordnance which looks down on Princes Street from Edinburgh Castle was manufactured. Passing through the centre of his steading, and crossing a field at the far edge of which we could see against the red of the sinking sun a straggling row of trees, he whispered to me that we would better keep the "jucks" between ourselves and the light, certainly a very wise precaution, considering the dusk. "Now, be verra quiet," was his remark, "I hear them in the burn just where it comes out of the milldam." Having loaded the chambers, I cocked both hammers, and closed up quickly, my companion doing the same. Just as the red glare of the sun on the icy fringes of the burn came into view, away went a whole flock with a squatter. In mid-air they were against the red glare of the sun and as quick as my finger could slip from right to left trigger I had an unmistakable brace on the left.

"Well, I'm good for a couple, I think," was my remark.

"I'm sure o' the auld drake," was his response, "but I'll no sweer to anither, as they crossed the shadow o' that auld larch tree. I'm hanged if I dinna cut it after this, for I've lost a shot before through it."

The old drake, however, and three dead ducks were laid in the grassfield beyond the burn, which had a hedge on the far side, and the larch-tree was saved. This was quite good enough for an evening's work, and, having my shooting appetite so far whetted, I began to think of my bodily wants. The savoury odour of ham and eggs, and their frizzling sound in the frying-pan, as my host opened the kitchen-door to give some parting words to his housekeeper, had set my teeth on edge. So we found our way back. The "touzie tea," the great meal of Scottish sportsmen who have been out either on a coursing, a curling, or a shooting expedition, was done ample justice to, and so was the toddy in the evening. Cattle-shows were discussed, old coursing meetings re-coursed, curling matches re-curl'd, till it was long past the time to retire. Sunday morning saw the frost as keen and bold as ever, and there was no doubt as to the fact that we were going to be in for a tack of it. A drive to the little parish kirk, where the parson re-dished an old sermon to about a score of shivering hearers, a walk through the fields, and an inspection of the prize animals, slipped us over the "Sawbath," and on Monday we were up early for the campaign. The mill-dam had, of course, to be visited first, and we rushed forward to the burn-edge, as we had done on Saturday night.

Bang! went the first barrel of my gun at a duck as it rose two feet from the water, and down it went like a pigeon newly shot over a trap. I was looking about for a second, when I heard my host give a roar of a laugh.

"You've settled that ane, any way. Ha, ha, he, he! Baith fished and shot."

"What do you mean?"

"Weel, don't ye see, man, it's hookit on a fish-hook, just like a trout, ye ken."

At this moment up rushed the young fellow who had taken charge of the gig-pony on the Friday night, and the tone of my host's merriment was changed to one of anger.

"Did I no' tell you that ye were no' to lift any jucks on the Sawbath Day, that the folk were talkin' about it?"

"Neither a did, sir," was the reply; "but I thocht it would be nae sin to set the traps."

I was laughing at his idea o. what he constituted Sawbath-breaking, when he jumped into the burn, and brought back the



W. Alexander

"I've settled that one way
Ha, ha, he, he!"

duck which had swallowed a fish-hook baited with wheat, the line being made fast to a large stone. It was, no doubt, a cruel style of capture, but I was assured it was a most effective one. Two dead ducks, caught in ordinary rabbit-traps, were also brought to land, having sprung the plate when gobbling for the wheat. Taking him with us as our guide and bag-carrier, for he knew all the points where he had laid down the decayed potatoes, we soon had a volley at thirty yards' rise at five which sprang out of a burn on our approach. Three fell, while a fourth went away, hard hit. Disturbed by the noise, a lot of teal rose further down, but, circling round, settled in another stream to our right. We crossed the, fields setting up and knocking over a hare in our progress, without rising them. When they did get up we had three of the nicely-plumaged little birds, but got made a fool of soon afterwards by a Jack Snipe. Dodging from meadow to meadow and taking snipe when they came in our way, we soon made up a heavy bag, and when the ferrets were brought out in the afternoon for some work in the hedgerows, I had reason to congratulate myself on my success. Two days more of it, and I was glad to give up the gun for the besom and the channel-stone, and enjoy that game of all northern games—curling.

