

A DAY AFTER WOOD-PIGEON.

NOWADAYS, when so much is said about the shooting of tame pigeons, a few experiences after the wild doves of the woods may not come amiss, even though the sport, like the pie, should lack the gamey flavour of the pheasant. Perhaps, too, pheasant shooting nowadays is a sport more ideal than real, for the time has long gone past when the sin of missing a woodcock was only equalled by that of hitting a hen—of course I mean a hen pheasant; for, although I have flushed a lady woodcock off her eggs in Scotland, authorities say that it has as yet been found impossible to discover a male from a female. That is, however, beside the question. Keepers have been busy herding the proud birds of the forest into nice little warm corners for battues, and in a few days all London will be hanging with “prime Indian corn-fed birds” from the preserves of the greatest sportsmen in the country. At Smithfield, as soon as a prime fed heifer has won a cup—in her moment of victory when she is being handled and fondled by an admiring public—someone steps forth from the crowd and hangs up to her admiring gaze, that “this beast has been bought by so-and-so, the eminent butchers, and will be killed on such and such a date.” Possibly some of the pheasants which are on their way to cover now will have some similar tickets on their hampers, and rejoice at the prospect of their being early despatched. At any rate, we will not stand to be laughed at because our modest sporting fare is wood-pigeon, which, if not game, bears at least this charm in our eyes, that it was bred naturally and reared wild.

Having had good sport at the wild rooks on the North coast as they swept out like flashes of light from the shelves of their nesting-ground, I thought I would like one real good day at wood-pigeon; not that I had not killed wood-pigeons before, for I have knocked down many a one of them. They were to be found in the fields in my neighbourhood in thousands, having come in from the woodlands to feed on the seeds of the yellow

mustard, that noxious weed which bothers the farmer on sandy lands, and anything they could find left over from the harvest. It has been contended by farmers that though the rook does some work for his living in way of destroying grub, the wood-pigeon is simply a gluttonous thief, which thinks of nothing but filling his capacious crop, either at seed-time from the sown grain, or in harvest from the stalks, which he thrashes with his wings, or the standing stooks. That is not, however, altogether the case. Few birds we know there are that do not do some good, and so the wood-pigeon, when starving in winter, picks up and destroys a large number of noxious seeds which, if left in the ground, would do much harm. Farmers are, however, very ignorant, as a rule, of the foods of the birds on their lands, and a few years ago I recollect the actual shooting of a young curlew perched on a rye sheaf; and the opening of its crop, which contained insects with which the heads of the grain were alive convinced the farmer of his error, and let him know that the bird was his friend, and not his robber.

It was while the pigeons were busy at this good work, I am sorry to confess, that I set out to make a bag of them. All, however, I daresay, that I got that day would never be missed from amongst them, as the field in which they were feeding was literally covered with them, while there were flights continually going and coming from the nearest woodland. The cartridges I had with me were all loaded with wood powder; not that it would give me any special advantage in the using of my second barrel, but from previous experience in stalking wild fowl, which are of a non-migratory nature, and keep circling round, I found that the puffs of blue smoke were but the flags which I, in man o' war style, had fired a gun to "call attention to signal," and that birds which might have come over me sheered off. In the days of breechloaders, when you can load without rising into view, this is a great advantage, either when stalking or when lying in wait.

It was close upon ten o'clock when I sallied out with my farmer and host—who carried me a bit out of his way in order to let me have a look at some favourite Clydesdales and Ayrshires, those milk-making Jerseys of the north—he carrying a single-barrelled muzzle-loader, into which, as he said, in order to put himself on something like equal terms with me, he would put

"twa chairges o' shot." And such shot! oh, dear! "What in all the world is that you have got hold of?" was my exclamation as he pulled out from his trousers pocket a handful of gnarled grey and silver looking stuff.

"Just the very stuff for them," was the reply, "bits off the pump-spout."

Bits off the spout of the pump they certainly were, dead, ugly, three-cornered nuggets of slugs, which made a man shudder.

"This is the coin Paddy pays his rents with," he said with a laugh, "but we use it here for cushie (cushet) doos, and if you wait here you'll see how it will sort them."

As, however, he measured his powder in something like the same fashion, from his left trousers pocket, as he did the "bits off the pump," I resolved to give him a wide berth at firing time, and choose a path of my own. A farmer's gun is never the cleanest kept, it must be borne in mind, and is always considered, like the farm engine boiler, to be quite strong enough till it bursts. As he refused the offer of some shells which I wished to cut in two at the junction of powder and shot, or just over the first wad, I said that I would prefer a good flying shot at them, and if he would get close up to them on the far side of the field, he would be sure to drive them over to me. This arrangement he most heartily acquiesced in, and we parted.

Watching him disappear out of view behind an unmortared stone wall, along the back of which he crouched, I leaped a narrow ditch and got under cover of a thin straggling hedge, which ran almost parallel. The hawthorn, however, had found the soil not very nutritious, and as manure they think is far too precious in the North to waste at the foot of the hedgerows, it was anything but a good specimen of a fence, the different bushes seeming all to wear an air of stiffness to each other, and refuse to join hands. There was one grand big aristocratic bush, however, about a hundred yards off, which seemed just to be the sort of place I wanted, and by dint of hard, careful crawling and the use of a furrow on the headland, I succeeded in reaching my vantage point.

Getting as close in to the root as I could, I could perceive about half-a-dozen great big wild croppers moving about indus-

triously, and quartering their ground like well-bred pointers, in search of seeds. They were, however, well out of range, for the wood-pigeon is not very easily killed in winter, more especially when feeding or flying towards you, as his breast is as strong as a shield. There was nothing to be done but to sit still and wait till they would come a little nearer, so I resolved to be patient for the pigeon. Somehow the pigeon is very unsuspecting, and not nearly so wakeful as other wild birds. I was just preparing for them when up they went with a flutter, and at the same time, from the far-side of the field, came the report of my friend's gun, and some of the "bits off the pump" whistled past inconveniently close. I held for the near bird of the flight as they swung close to my hiding-place, but notwithstanding that I shook him up with both barrels he held on to the woodland, though several times I saw him reel, steady and recover, no doubt feeling anxious to die in the company of his friends if death was to overtake him. With many a whoop and waving of dead, my entertainer rejoined me, having put his full dose of shot into a bluish-grey flock of them so well that he picked up half-a-dozen. Why had I missed? That was an easy question. My bird was not close enough within range.

"Ha, ha, ha!" was his rejoinder, "you had no powder in your gun. I could see that easy by the smoke."

As it was of little use explaining to him that my powder was a peculiar kind and almost smokeless, I was forced to accept an exchange, as he would like to try a shot with "ane o' these new-fashioned dandy guns." Fortunately his was still empty; had it been loaded by himself I must have felt bound to decline. As it was, I declined his powder, and cut up a shell, using some of his three-cornered shot. Separating again, I waited and waited, but no pigeons seemed to come somehow, and I was left to moralise on the old days of muzzle-loaders, and think of pleasant old memories—memories somehow which made me wish that breechloaders were never invented. Visions of eager setters crouching in the heather came up, of times when the heel of the stock rested on the toe of our left foot, and we rammed a well-fitting wad home with that pleasant sensation which only can be compared to the feel of a well-hooked fish, or the mouth of a well-broken horse. So as I waited, I hummed out the song of—

THE GOOD OLD GUN FOR ME.

My locks are grey—I've seen my day—
And my old gun locks are worn ;
But my eye is keen, and she still shoots clean,
As on that August morn
When the covey sprang, and her voice first rang,
And we saw our first brace fall ;
And we stood to load, with the old ramrod,
As "Down charge !" was the call.
You may load—click, click !—with your new guns quick,
But sights you ne'er will see ;
As, with eager face, the crouching brace
Watched the good old gun and me.

Loudly they preach, and praise the breech—
They may do so till they're dumb—
Rebounding locks, and hammerless stocks,
But I like the comb in my thumb.
When the gun I shook, at the nipple I'd look,
To see if the powder was down ;
And I felt as blessed, when the cap I pressed,
As if I'd gained a crown.
Oh, well may they boast, but a pleasure they've lost
Although they may talk so free—
'Twas to load a gun as it then was done,
Oh, the good old gun for me.

Few shots we spent, but were content
Our modest bag to fill,
In present days and modern ways,
Their whole desire's to kill.
For a surer shot to fill the pot,
They now half tame their game ;
We care no fig, for bags so big
Ne'er means a surer aim.
So the powder-flask, the old shot belt
And ramrod, drink all three ;
The old gun wad, the old gun cap,
And the good old gun for me.

At last the pigeons began to come fluttering out from the woodlands, first by twos and then by threes, till the field was

well covered. Once or twice I could have had two or three at a time, but I wanted a nice good flying swipe at one of them. At last I stood up to half-a-dozen which were feeding thirty-five yards away, and let go on the left one. Down, however, went a bird a good ten feet to the right while the other went on strong. Suspecting that my companion must have been just looking over my shoulder I looked round with surprise, expecting to find him, but no ! I was just in time to see him deliver both barrels without effect at a passing flight. Walking over and picking up the dead I found that one of the "bits off the pump" had gone right through its head, and then recollected his remark that the grand thing about his shot was that it *scattered*. When he rejoined me he was loud in his condemnation of my weapon and the style of loading it, and would not believe in its killing powers till I showed him what it could do with the sole of an old boot he stuck up at forty yards.

In the after part of the day, by dodging round, I got some capital rising, and also side-wing shots, when in full flight. In the evening I got in amongst the trees when they were out feeding, and after the single barrel had warned them home got several good shots as they came in to settle on the branches. Altogether, though I never shall make such a wide miss and such a clever hit with the same shot, I shall not forget my day amongst the wood-pigeon.

