

PLOVER-SHOOTING.

THERE are, I dare say, thousands of people who pause in their perambulations through the streets of London opposite the game-dealers' to examine the dead birds hanging at the windows, who do not know a grouse from a partridge or a partridge from a plover. Folks in the country would, perhaps, find it difficult to believe this ; but if they had taken a turn along the Strand one September with the writer, and seen the windows of shooting-coat vendors filled with stuffed game, amongst which were ptarmigan, of all birds, feeding along with partridges on the tops of sheaves of wheat, they would not doubt the assertion. It cannot, however, be expected that town-bred people can have a full knowledge of country things and country practices—any more, indeed, than our country cousins can have a knowledge of the manners and customs of people born within the sound of Bow bells, and who have never been out of London. It was while taking a stroll through Leadenhall the other day, watching the sales of feathered dainties for Christmas feasts, that my eye rested upon a full string of lapwings, or green-plover, alongside a string of dead golden-plover, that I began to think of the happy days I had had, gathering the eggs of the former in Scotland, about the time of Easter, and the rattling good day's sport I had in shooting the latter about Christmas time. The former I have never pulled, and never will pull, a trigger on, as it is one of the most harmless, most gentle, and most useful of birds, as the farmer well knows, and, though I may have lifted an egg or two at a time in my boyhood, I am glad to say that I have never killed any. To shoot one is to perform no great feat, as it will go flip-flap over your head at times, and, not being a fast flyer or a very wary bird, you can, if at all clever, bring it down as easy as you would a maizefed hen-pheasant at a *battue*. With the golden-plover it is, however, very different, for the latter has about it a good deal of the wariness of its oft-times companion, the curlew, and seven of the latter are said to be enough for a sportsman's lifetime,

though if I have killed one I have killed twenty, and don't feel it time to lay down the gun yet. But what about plover-shooting? asks the reader. Well, that is just what I am coming to, and I make it a rule to stalk up to my subject with the pen just as I would do if it were a living, moving, fast-on-the-wing thing of life, and I had my gun in my hand.

It was Christmas time (or rather I might say it was New Year's Day time, seeing that in the north Christmas is not recognised, while the opening day of the year is baptised with buckets of whiskey), about eleven years ago, that I was asked to give a tenant-farmer on the Ayrshire seaboard a day's rabbit-shooting, as he was cleaning out the vermin on the borders of some fields, which he had made up his mind to crop. The land, which was of a sandy and dry, porous nature, just what bunny likes in the breeding season, had been lying in grass, and had been eaten almost too bare by them to admit of successful snaring, for you must have a little roughness about for snares, and a hard December frost had made trapping an absolute impossibility. Snow in the atmosphere, too, had kept them from bolting, for your rabbit is a rare hand at a weather forecast, and so nets were not of much use. Good hands with the gun, uncovered holes, and smart ferrets, therefore, were what were needed, and, guns and ferrets doing their duty, we had bowled over something like 160 couples in three days, and were feeling that "fur-lifting" was getting somewhat monotonous.

"What say you to an off-day at the plovers?" said Young Dan, my host's son. "There's a rare lot of them gathering down now about the shore-edges. They must have been having a hard time of it somewhere."

"The very thing, my boy," was my reply. "I've been having my eyes on these flocks that have been whistling past us for the two days, thinking always they'd come near enough to let me put two barrels in amongst them; see, here come a lot now."

Dan put his little finger to his mouth, and gave a close imitation of their call "*Phe-oo! phe-oo!*" and it made the leader bend to the right for a moment, but only a moment, and on they swept.

"No use," said the young farmer, laughingly; "they must be stalked, and it needs a couple to do it at least, with a couple of lads to help; many a round good lot of them I've killed."

A rumbling sound under our feet stopped both of our tongues and a pair of rabbits, one going to the right and another to our left, set our guns ablaze, both being doubled up without the second pull of a trigger from either of us. As the ferrets showed signs of getting sleepy from long, hard hunting, and might, therefore, take it into their heads to lie up for a whole night if we persisted in working them any more, we lifted them, and put them in their comfortable little grass-lined boxes, and started for home. Just as we had neared the door, and had resolved to draw our cartridges, we heard the well-known "*phe-oo! phe-oo!*" and had guns up in a second, just as a flock dashed across a hedge, and swept along the field again. The contents of four barrels were on their line as fast as we could shift fingers inside the trigger-guards, and we had the satisfaction of seeing three birds dash themselves dead against the ground. We picked them up, and found them to be nice and plump, and in rare condition, as, indeed, they were bound to be from the strong dash of speed they showed.

"They're harder to kill now than in the harvest time," said Dan; "but there's one good thing, there's more of them. We get a lot of them in August and September, when they come down from their breeding-grounds, and join company with the lapwings before setting out for the south. Their flight is slower then, and you can approach them easier, the younger birds, which have never seen or heard guns, letting you well up to between fifty and sixty yards for the first day or two without the aid of cover. After that you must make use of turf banks, dry ditches, or rising grounds to get within range of them. I'll show you to-morrow, however, how to manage them."

Taking the young farmer's advice that night, I filled a lot of shells with an ounce and a quarter of No. 7 shot, over three drachms, marked like all others

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while he sponged out an old Queen Bess, which had not been used for some time, saying it was good for sending a dose of shot amongst them, though it was "a little rough on the shoulders."

We were wakened by curlews calling next morning, for the

house was situated in the centre of a long range of meadows, which were rough with rushes, which in times of thaw were the favourite resort of the "whaup," as the bird is called in the north. Breakfast of the halesome parritch, some tea, and a dry Loch Fyne herring, or "Glasgow magistrate," over, we donned our shooting gear, and held out, Dan carrying two guns, his own D.B.L. and the Old Queen Bess. Two lads, whose usual occupation about the place was scarecrowing, but who were frozen out on account of the rooks being similarly situated, the soil being too hard to penetrate, came behind to assist in the stalking, as the young farmer called it, though the stalking was more like driving.

"We may as well take all we can get," he said. "So here, my boy, take hold of 'old mother,' and be sure you don't pull the trigger, for there's as much powder in her as would blow up the house, besides half a pound of shot."

The stripling, who had been used to firing off the gun when moderately charged with powder, in order to frighten the rooks, took hold of Old Queen Bess, and we held up through the middle of the rushes. Up sprang a jack-snipe with a squeak, and down he came to my right barrel. Just as I had marked the particular tuft where he fell, my companion gave me a shout to lie down, and, looking round, I saw he was lying flat on his face, while his eyes were cast in the direction of the fields to the left.

"What a lot of them ! Fill your left barrel, and keep ready," he cried.

"Ready for what ?" I asked, shoving, however, as requested, a fresh cartridge into the left chamber to replace the one whose contents had been too much for Jack Snipe.

"Plover ! Why, can't you see them ? Your gun has disturbed them, and they're circling about. Keep down, and they may come this way ; if not, they will shift off a couple of miles."

Looking upwards, I saw, sure enough, crowds of them circling round and round, now and then coming down close to the ground, only to rise away into the air fully a hundred feet.

"*Phe-oo ! Phe-oo !*" whistled out Dan with his left little finger in his mouth in answer to the note of a straggler, which seemed to be on the outlook for companions. I had my eyes almost

watering with watching the gyrations of the big crowd when from behind me came the sharp shout, "Look out! quick!"

Bending sharp to the left, on my knee, I found a flock crossing Dan, who was in the "ready" position, just giving them both barrels. Swerving wildly as I flung forward on them, my shot went through the empty air, and to my utter surprise my left barrel drew down nothing. Dan's gun, however, had been good for three, and I was just going to ask him how in the world I had missed them, when he let me know without my doing so.

"It's no use your trying to follow on golden-plover going at that speed: they are the fastest birds that fly in winter, driven grouse and driven partridges notwithstanding. You may not think so, but it's true. You've only got to see the way they dash themselves to pieces when they are killed to let you know that. See! look here! this one has knocked its head off."

Looking round, I saw that the bird he held up had almost knocked its head away from its body in consequence of the speed it had on when it came down; and though I was a little disappointed at the non-success of my two shots, I resolved to take the young fellow's warning, as he had killed more golden-plover with the gun than any other man in the west country. Picking up my snipe, we held forward again through the bushes, and succeeded in getting a brace of jack, there being a few springs in the marshiest bits of the meadows which rarely, if ever, froze up, and these were, of course, just little bits of paradise to Master John in such severe weather. By this time the plovers had settled out of sight in a field beyond a slight rising ground, and to approach them Dan counselled a stalk up the sides of a ditch, which he said would run very near to them if not within shot, while the lads should wait till they were signalled by a slight wave of his hat, high enough to be seen by one on the watch, but not by the birds. It was anything but nice work, crawling along the sloping banks of that ditch or cut, hats off and heads down, with guns carried at the trail; still we managed, though at times I was very nearly into the water, which was, according to my guide and companion, fully four feet deep. Nice treat it will be, thought I to myself, to get up to the neck in clear frosty weather, after a lot of plover, as if one were hunting about for duck. On we crawled and scrambled, Dan going

up to the edge and peering several times, apparently unsatisfactorily, as he would return again, and head down and cap in hand motion me forward. At length, after another look over the edge of the bank, where a small broom bush afforded some cover, he signalled me to come upwards cautiously. Slipping up gently, I raised my eyes over the edge and had the satisfaction of seeing a long wide flock of golden-plover, mixed with green plover or lapwings, and, "Confound it!" I heard Dan mutter, "three infernal curlews." "It's no for nocht the gled whistles," is an old Scotch proverb, and it is equally true that "it is no for nocht the whaup whistles," as he will jump up and let out a wild scream just as you have about concluded your stalk, and go away with his head turned first left, then right, over his wing, as much as to say, "Look out everybody, there is danger about." Still, plovers will sometimes not pay much more attention to the curlew than halt in their feeding, and put themselves more on the alert, so we were hopeful. The whole of them were, however, forty yards out of range, so what was to be done? Dan watched them, however, carefully for a moment or two, and then appeared to be satisfied.

"The birds are moving a little in towards us, so we'll have them if we are careful. We must bring the lads over the hill, though."

So saying he placed his hat in view, and we saw the two boys make their appearance on the rising ground. At once the curlews went off with a scream, but the golden-plovers only cocked their heads and gave out a slight mewling whistle, while the lapwings or peesweeps seemed to be pondering as to who and what the disturbers were. Accustomed to shepherds, who never harmed them when passing close, they, after a little watching, gave no heed, and commenced to hop about and examine the ground as before. After advancing a short distance, Dan gave two waves with his hat sideways, as if to his collies working sheep on the hillsides, and both closed in a little again. Two waves more of the hat to the right, and they commenced to walk to the right again, all this time, as I could see, moving closer. By this time the birds, apprehending some slight danger from that direction, and totally unconscious of our presence, *the real danger*, commenced to alter their course, more in the direction of the ditch. Seeing this Dan stuck his hat over the bank, and held it firm, a

signal which he told me was for the lads to sit down in the field where they were.

"Let's get forward," was his call to me ; "we'll have a rare try. I'm going to give them the muzzle-loader to begin with."

"The deuce you are!—then I'll keep wide of you," was my remark ; for I had seen him put three charges of powder into her and fully two handfuls of shot, for he was like the Esquimaux a whaling captain once told me of, who was of belief that success all lay in the loading—"plenty powder, plenty kill," regardless of all consequences.

Dan having gone twenty yards, showed the muzzles of both of his guns over the bank the double-barrelled muzzle-loader on the left for secondary use, and then motioned me to wait till he fired the big gun amongst them, sitting, or, rather on the rise, which is the best time. Breathless I waited and watched the birds, which now and then would run into little tempting groups, and as often break away into straggling order. A dozen of the front division had just fully congregated, when *Phe-oo!* from Dan was followed by a terrific bang from the Queen Bess, while the contents of my two barrels went though the second flight. I saw clearly enough that a lot of birds were down, but out of the side of my right eye I saw the young farmer disappear with a splash into the ditch, out of which I extricated him by seizing hold of the muzzle of the long gun, the cause of the misfortune.

"That must have been strong poother, or I must have been sitting rather light on my knee," was all he said, shaking himself like an Irish water-spaniel new out of the water.

"I was afraid you had overdone it at the time I saw you loading," was my reply. "It takes a pretty strong man to make his shoulder a punt swivel for a duck-gun."

"I wouldn't a minded the knocking over, but to be kicked into the ditch by the auld jade was more than I bargained for ; however, let's see what we have got, and I will run home and change my clothes."

The two lads had by this time run down upon the scene, and commenced to pick up the killed and wounded. When all had been gathered together we found we had six brace and a half—a fair lot for one volley. Shoving them into the game bag,

Dan, who was by this time white with ice, seized his gun, leaving the *Queen Bess* in the hands of one of the lads, and bolted homewards. In an hour he returned, clad in a dry, warm rig, and we commenced fresh operations. About noon, however, the whole flock getting afraid, rose high in the air, and, after circling round several times over our heads well out of range, darted off for some fresh ground, and we did not see them for several days afterwards. When we counted the slain we found we had fifteen brace beside the three jack-snipe and a curlew, which dodged me only to fly over the deadly barrels of the young farmer's gun. Altogether, we had no reason to be dissatisfied with our off-day among the golden-plover.

