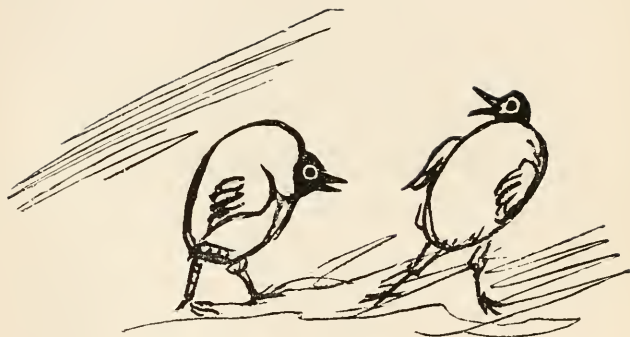


DEER-STALKING.





Dead Stag and Eagles.

DEER-STALKING.



CHAPTER XXV.

Deer-stalking ; enjoyment of—Fine Stag ; ill-luck in stalking ; escapes of Stag ; start in pursuit of him—View of Country —Roebucks—Hare and Marten—Tracks of Deer ; find the Stag ; death of—Meet the Shepherd—Cottage.

THOUGH we are all naturally gregarious animals, much pleasure is often derived from a lonely walk over mountain and moor, when, independent of the wishes or movements of any one else, we can go hither and thither as the objects or the fancy of the moment may lead us. In following up my sporting excursions I frequently prefer being alone, and independent of either friend or keeper ; not from any disinclination to the society of my fellow-men—far from it—but from a liking to watch and observe the habits and proceedings of many of the living animals of the country. Now one's friend may become bored by being carried off from his shooting, and being hampered by the movements of another person whose attention for the time being

is taken up in following some bird or beast not included in the game-book, and therefore not deemed worthy of notice during the shooting season. If my own larder or that of my friend is in want of replenishing, I can fill it as well and quickly as most people ; but at other times I like to take my shooting quietly. In deer-stalking the solitary sportsman has often great advantages, though his enjoyment of the sport is much enhanced by the thought that he has some friend, some "fidus Achates," to whom he can relate the incidents of the day, and who, following the same pursuits, will enjoy and appreciate the account of the pains and fatigues he has undergone before bringing down the noble animal whose horns he exhibits in triumph. Much of my deer-stalking time was spent alone, or at most with no companionship save that of an ancient and experienced Highlander, or a chance visitor—some travelling laird or sportsman—who was as glad to receive as I was to give provend and rest for himself and horses. From these circumstances I got into the habit of sketching off an account of my day's wanderings, when they had been of that kind that I felt I might say to myself "*forsan et hæc olim meminisse juvabit.*"

I had more than once seen in a particular corrie, or not far from it, a remarkably fine stag: his horns,

though not peculiarly long, were heavy and large, with ten points well and evenly set on, of a dark colour, and the points as white as ivory. The animal himself was evidently of very great size and age, and in fine condition. He lived quite alone, and did not seem to associate with any of the other deer who frequented that district, although I once saw him rise and trot off, warned by the movement of a herd of hinds; and at another time he rose unexpectedly on my firing at two stags in a corrie: still on neither of these occasions, nor at any other time, did he appear to be lying in company with the other deer, although not above half a mile from them, nor did he join them in their flight when moved. Instead of this he invariably trotted off sulkily; and if I chanced to fall in with his track again, it was still solitary, and speeding in a direct course over bog and hill to some far off mountain glen or corrie. The shepherds, who generally gave me notice of any particularly fine stag they might see in their rounds, distinguished this one by a Gaelic name, signifying the big red stag, as, besides his other attributes, his colour was of a peculiarly bright red. Donald and I had made an unsuccessful raid or two into the red stag's country, some unforeseen or unguarded against circumstance always warning him

of our neighbourhood too soon ; besides which he had a troublesome habit of suddenly rising in the most unaccountable manner from some unexpected corner or hollow. We might examine long and carefully the whole face of a hill, and having made ourselves perfectly sure that nothing larger than a mountain hare could be concealed on its surface, up would rise the red stag from some trifling hollow, or from behind some small hillock, and, without looking to the right or left, off he would go at his usual trot, till we lost him in the distance.

At another time, after we had beat, as we imagined, a whole wood, so that we were convinced that neither deer nor roe could have been passed over, up would get the stag out of some clump of larch or birch, apparently scarcely big enough to hold a hare. Or else he would rise at the very feet of one of the beaters, and though not above a hundred yards from the corner where I was posted he always managed to turn back, perhaps almost running over some man who had no gun : but he invariably escaped being shot at, excepting on one occasion, when I placed a friend who was with me near a pass by which the stag sometimes left a favourite wood. I had stationed the shooter at the distance of half a mile from the wood, as the deer was always most careful of himself, and most suspicious of

danger, when he first left the cover. On this occasion, according to my friend's account, the great beast had trotted quickly and suddenly past him at eighty yards' distance, and took no notice of the barrels discharged at his broadside, though fired by a very good shot, and out of a first-rate Manton gun that carried ball like a rifle. My friend could not account for missing him ; but missed he evidently was.

I determined one day to start off alone in pursuit of this stag, and to pay no attention to any other deer I might see during my excursion. Donald's orders were to meet me at a particular rock, about eight miles from home, the next day at two o'clock ; my intention being, in the event of my not returning the same night, to work my way to a distant shepherd's house, and there to sleep. Donald had directions as to the line by which he was to come, that he might not disturb one or two favourite corries ; and he was also to bring a setter and my shooting apparatus, as I took with me only a single-barrel rifle and a few bullets. I did not take Bran, as, being alone, I could not be quite sure that he would not be in my way when getting up to the deer, in case I found him ; but I took a dog of a very different kind—a powerful bulldog, who was well accustomed to

deer-stalking, and who would lie down for an hour together if desired to do so, without moving an inch.

On leaving the house at daybreak, or at least before the sun was risen, I struck off in a straight line through the woods, till, having got through the whole cover, I sat myself down on the top of what was called the Eagle's Craig, and turned, for the first time that morning, to the east to look at the sun, which was now rising in its utmost glory and brightness,—a glorious sight, and one that loses not its interest though seen each returning day, particularly when viewed from the lonely places either of land or sea: below me lay a great extent of pine-wood, concealing the house and the cultivated land around it, with the exception of a glimpse caught here and there of the bright green meadow which formed the banks of the river. The river itself was visible through many openings, and where the outline of the trees was lower than in other places: beyond the river rose a black-looking moorland, which, growing gradually higher and higher, terminated in mountains with a most varied and fantastic outline of peaks and precipices, the stony sides of which were lighted up by the rising sun, and exhibited a strong contrast to the deep colour of the hills

below them, covered with dark heather, and not yet reached by the sun's rays.

On the other side the ground was of quite a different character: immediately on leaving the wood, the country for some distance had a dreary cold look, being covered not with heather, but with a kind of gray grass, called there deer's grass, which grows only in cold swampy ground. Here and there this was varied by ranges of greystone and rock, and dotted with numerous lochs. In the distance to the west I could see the upper part of a favourite rocky corrie, the sun shining brightly on its gray rocks: a little to my right the fir-woods terminated, but on that side, between me and the river, of which every bend and reach was there in full view, were numerous little hillocks with birch-trees, old and rugged, growing on them: here and there, too, amongst these hillocks, was a great round gray rock, and the whole of this rough ground was intersected with bright green glades. Some three miles up the river a blue line of smoke ascended perpendicularly in the still morning, the chimney it came from being concealed by a group of birch-trees.

I looked carefully with my glass at all the nooks and grassy places to see if any deer were feeding about them, but could see nothing but two or three

old roe. A moment after a pair of young roe walked quietly out of some concealed hollow, and after gazing about a short time and having a game of romps on the top of a hillock, were joined by their mother, and then all three came into the woods at the foot of the craig where I was sitting. The grouse were calling to each other in all directions, and every now and then an old cock-bird would take a short fly, crowing, to some stone or hillock, where he stood and sunned himself. I was struck just then by the curious proceedings of a mountain-hare, who had been feeding about two hundred yards from me ; she suddenly began to show symptoms of uneasiness and fear, taking short runs and then stopping, and turning her ears towards the hillside behind her. I soon saw the cause of her alarm in a beautiful marten cat : the latter, however, having probably already made her morning meal, took little notice of the hare, but came with quiet leaps straight towards me. As I was well concealed amongst the gray fragments of rock which covered the top of the craig, and which were exactly the same colour as the clothes I was dressed in, the little animal did not see me. When about thirty yards off she suddenly stopped and looked in my direction, having evidently become aware, through some

of her fine senses, of the vicinity of an enemy. She offered me a fair shot, and, well aware of the quantity of game killed by these animals, I sent a rifle-ball right into her yellow chest as she sat upright with her head turned towards me.

But time advanced, so I delayed no longer, and started off in a westerly direction. Many a weary mile did I tramp that day without seeing anything but grouse, and an occasional hare. Nevertheless I saw many fresh tracks of red-deer: particularly crossing one mossy piece of ground, where there appeared to have been at least twenty or thirty deer, and amongst them one or two large fine stags. In one place I saw a solitary track of a noble stag, but it was two or three days old. I judged that the herd whose tracks I saw had a good chance of being in or about a corrie, a good view of which I should get from the next height; but after a long and tiresome survey of the ground I could see no living creature, excepting a heron, who was standing in his usual disconsolate attitude on a stone in the burn that ran out of the corrie, adding by his very presence to the solitude of the scene. "I don't understand where these deer can be," was my internal ejaculation, "but here they are not; so come on, good dog." Another and another height did I pass over, and many a glen did I scan inch by inch till my eyes

ached with straining through the glass : nothing could I see, and I began to think to myself that as it was past two and the shepherd's house was some three hours' walk, I had better turn off in that direction ; so slanting my course a little to the north, I pulled my plaid tight round me and walked on. In deer-stalking, as much as in the every-day pursuits of life, the old adage holds good—

Credula vitam
Spes fovet.

And this said hope carries the weary stalker over many a long mile. I came in half an hour to a large extent of heather-covered ground, interspersed with a great number of tumulus-shaped hillocks. I looked carelessly over these, when my eye was suddenly attracted by a red-coloured spot on one of the mounds. I turned the glass in that direction, and at once saw that it was a large bright-coloured stag with fine antlers, and altogether an animal worth some trouble. He was in a very difficult situation to approach. He commanded a complete view of the face of the hill opposite to him, and over the summit of which I was looking, and I was astonished he had not observed me, notwithstanding all my care. As the wind blew, I could not approach him from the opposite direction, even if I

had time to get round there before he rose ; and I knew that once on foot to feed, his direction would be so uncertain amongst the mounds where he was, that my chance would be small.

After a short survey I started off at my best pace to the right, thinking that from the nature of the ground I might succeed in getting into the valley unobserved ; and once there, by taking advantage of some hillock, I should have a tolerable chance of approaching him. After what appeared to me a long tramp I came to a slight rise of the shoulder of the hill : beyond this was a hollow, by keeping in which I hoped to get down unobserved. It was already past three, but the stag had not yet moved ; so, keeping the tops of his horns in view, I began to crawl over the intervening height. At two or three places which I tried I saw that I could not succeed. At last I came to a more favourable spot ; but I saw that it still would not do, however well the dog behaved, and a capital stalker he was, imitating and following every movement of mine, crouching when I crouched, and crawling when I crawled. I did not wish to leave him quite so far from the deer, so I made another cast, and this time found a place over which we both wriggled ourselves quite unseen. Thank God ! was my exclamation,

as I found myself in a situation again where I could stand upright. Few people excepting deerstalkers know the luxury of occasionally standing upright, after having wormed oneself horizontally along the ground for some time. There were the horns with their white tips still motionless, excepting when he turned back his head to scratch his hide or knock off a fly. I now walked easily without stooping till I was within three or four hundred yards of him, when I was suddenly pulled up by finding that there was no visible manner of approaching a yard nearer. The last sheltering mound was come to; and although these mounds from a distance looked scattered closely, when I got amongst them I found they were two or three rifle-shots apart at the nearest. There was one chance that occurred to me: a rock or rather stone lay about eighty yards from the stag, and it seemed that I might make use of this as a screen, so as, if my luck was great, to get at the animal. I took off my plaid, laid it on the ground, and ordered the dog to lie still on it; then buttoning my jacket tightly, and putting a piece of cork, which I carried for the purpose, into the muzzle of my rifle to prevent the dirt getting into it, I started in the most snakelike attitude that the human frame would admit of. I found that by keeping perfectly flat,

and not even looking up once, I could still get on unobserved. Inch by inch I crawled : as I neared the stone my task was easier, as the ground sank a little and the heather was longer. At last I reached the place, and saw the tips of his horns not above eighty yards from me. I had no fear of losing him now ; so, taking out the cork from my rifle, I stretched my limbs one by one, and prepared to rise to an attitude in which I could shoot ; then, pushing my rifle slowly forward, I got the barrel over the stone unperceived, and rose very gradually on one knee. The stag seemed to be intent in watching the face of the opposite hill, and, though I was partially exposed, did not see me : his attitude was very favourable, which is seldom the case when a stag is lying down ; so, taking a deliberate aim at his shoulder, I was on the point of firing, when he suddenly saw me, and, jumping up, made off as hard as he could. He went in a slanting direction, and before he had gone twenty yards I fired. I was sure that I was steady on him, but the shot only seemed to hurry his pace ; on he went like an arrow out of a bow, having showed no symptom of being hurt beyond dropping his head for a single moment.

I remained motionless in despair : a more mag-

nificent stag I had never seen, and his bright red colour and white-tipped horns showed me that he was the very animal I had so often seen and wished to get. He ran on without slackening his pace for at least a hundred yards, then suddenly fell with a crash to the ground, his horns rattling against the stones. I knew he was perfectly dead, so, calling the dog, ran up to him. The stag was quite motionless, and lay stretched out where he fell, without a single struggle. I found on opening him that the ball had passed through the lower part of his heart—a wound I should have imagined sufficient to have deprived any animal of life and motion instantaneously. But I have shot several deer through the heart, and have observed that when hit low they frequently ran from twenty to eighty yards. If, however, the ball has passed through the upper part of the heart, or has cut the large blood-vessels immediately above it, death has been instantaneous, the animal dropping without a struggle.

Having duly admired and examined the poor stag, not, I must own, without feeling compunction at having put an end to his life, I set to work bleeding and otherwise preparing him for being left on the hill till the next day, secure from attacks of ravens and eagles; then, having taken my land-

marks so as to be sure of finding him again, I started on my march to the shepherd's house, looking rather anxiously round at the increasing length of my shadow and the diminished height of the sun; the more so as I had to pass some very boggy ground with which I was not very well acquainted. I had not gone a quarter of a mile, however, when I saw the shepherd himself making his way homewards. I gave a loud whistle to catch his attention, and, having joined him, I took him back to show the exact place where the stag was lying, in order to save myself the trouble of returning the next day. Malcolm was rather an ally of mine, and his delight was great at seeing the stag.

“’Deed, ay, sir; it’s just the muckle red stag himsel’; mony a time I’ve seen the bonny beast. Save us! how red his pile is!”

“Yes, he is a fine beast, Malcolm; and you must bring your gray pony for him to-morrow. I must have the head and one haunch down to the house; take the rest to your mother; I dare say she can salt it.”

I knew pretty well that this good lady must have had some experience in making red-deer hams, unless Malcolm was very much slandered by his neighbours; nevertheless he had promised me not to poach on my ground, and knowing that I trusted

quite to his honour, I believe that he neither did so himself nor allowed any one else to do so.

“You are ower good, your Honour; and the mither will be glad of a bit venison; it’s a long time now since I killed a deer.”

“When was the last, Malcolm?” I asked.

“Why, mony a day, sir; but, to tell the truth, it is only yesterday since I shot at one.”

“And where was that, Malcolm?”

“Why, if your Honour wishes to know, and I am sure you will do no ill turn to a lad for taking a shoot, I’ll just tell you.”

I could not help smiling at Malcolm’s describing himself as a lad. He was six feet three inches without his shoes, and a perfect giant in every proportion, but strong and active withal, and a capital stalker, being able to wind his great body about through moss and heather in a manner that was quite marvellous. Malcolm’s account, then, was, that a shepherd on an adjoining property, or rather on one divided from where we were by a long lake, had asked him to come up some evening with his gun to “fleg” some deer that had been destroying his little crop of oats. Well, Malcolm had gone; and the evening before I met him he had fired in the dusk at a stag with a handful of large slugs; the deer was hit and crippled, but had thrown

out the colley dogs, which had pursued him, by taking to the water and apparently swimming the loch. If he had managed to cross he would be on my side of it, and I might by chance fall in with him on my return home the next day in some of the burns and glens through which I should have to walk. I did not blame Malcolm much, knowing the mischief done by deer to the shepherds' little crops; besides which the ground where he had shot this stag was not preserved or used as a forest by the owner.

We had a weary walk, though enlivened by Malcolm's quaint remarks. Without his company and guidance I saw plainly that I should have had some difficulty in finding my way through the rough ground over which we had to pass. The night, too, had come on quite dark before we reached the shealing.

On entering I was much struck by the group which we saw by the light of several splinters of bog-fir laid on a stone. Malcolm's old father, a man whose years numbered at least fourscore, was reading a chapter of the Bible in Gaelic to the rest of his family, which consisted of his wife, a woman of nearly equal age to himself, but hale, neat, and vigorous, and of a sister and brother of Malcolm's: the former a peculiarly pretty, though somewhat

extensive damsel ; and the latter a giant like Malcolm himself, equally good-looking, and equally respected in his own rank of life. The old man having looked off his book for a moment, without pausing in his reading, continued his chapter. Following Malcolm's example, I took off my cap, and sat down on a chest in the room, and though of course not understanding a word of what was read, instead of being inclined to smile at the peculiar twang and bagpipe-like drawl with which the old man read, I was struck by the appearance of real devotion and reverence of the whole group, and looked on with feelings of interest and respect till he came to the end of a somewhat lengthy chapter. This finished, the old man, resting his head on his hands, which his long gray hair entirely covered, uttered a short prayer in the same language. The moment this was done he handed the Bible to his daughter, who, wiping it with her apron, deposited it in a chest. I was then received with great kindness, and preparations were made for Malcolm's and my supper, which consisted of tea, oat-cake, eggs, and some kippered trout, caught in a stream running out of the large loch, and which when alive must have weighed at least twelve pounds : such cream and milk, too, as is met with, or at any rate enjoyed, only in the Highlands.

With great discretion the old people talked to me but little during the meal, seeing that I was tired and hungry ; but over the glass of capital toddy which succeeded the tea I had many a question to answer respecting the killing of the stag, etc. The old lady spoke very little English, but understood it well enough. The old shepherd listened with great interest, the more so from having been a somewhat famous stalker in his own time, and now a great lamenter of the good old time when deer and black cattle were more plentiful, and sheep comparatively few to what they are in the present day.

