CHAPTER XXVIII.

Disease amongst Grouse; difficulty of assigning its cause—Supply of Grouse to Poulterers—Netting game, legal and illegal—Disguised Poachers—Game-Laws—Preserves—Criminality of Poachers—Epidemics amongst Hares, etc.—Black Game—Hybrids—Wood-pigeons—Geese—Sentinels.

It is difficult, I ought perhaps to say impossible, to understand the cause and origin of what the Highland keepers call "the disease" amongst grouse. For the last few years it has in several districts almost swept away these birds; so much so that scarcely a young bird is to be found, and very few old ones. Some persons assign one thing as the cause of this and some another, all plausible, but all on investigation equally unsatisfactory. One keeper will tell you that the heather "is too short;" another, that "it is too long;" one, that the hills have been too wet during the spring; and another, that the weather was too dry: in fact, the most experienced persons are all at fault. For my own part I conceive that it is some epidemic which cuts off the birds indiscriminately in wet and dry, cold and hot weather, without reference to

state of ground or climate. The worst feature of the case is, that as yet nothing approaching to a cure or preventive has been discovered. I should be very much inclined in a diseased district to shoot hard for a season, instead of sparing the survivors; and *then* to give the grouse a year or two of entire rest and immunity from dog and gun. If the hills are let to strangers from a distance during a scarcity of this kind, it is natural to expect that, having no interest in them beyond the season, and paying a considerable rent, they will shoot as many birds as they can, without thinking of the future; and as in general the grounds are each year let to new tenants, the same thing will occur again and again until the birds are nearly extinct.

Luckily, in favourable seasons and on good ground, grouse seem to grow and increase almost like the heather among which they dwell, and the hills soon get stocked again. The number of grouse sent to the markets in London, and in all the large towns in England, from the beginning of August to the end of the season, is perfectly astonishing; and indeed until March any quantity of grouse can be procured from the poulterers and game-dealers. Immense must be the slaughter to afford this supply: the greatest portion are shot; but in some districts considerable numbers are

caught with horse-hair snares set upon the sheaves of corn. Netting does not seem to succeed to any great extent, although it has frequently been tried by poachers. I confess that I do not see why netting game should be considered a more destructive and poaching-like system than shooting it—I mean, of course, if it is carried on legitimately and as an amusement. I admit that the whole covey or pack is caught at once, but that they should all of them have their necks wrung is by no means a necessary *sequitur*. There is, also, a great degree of skill and perfect training required in the "setting dog," which gives much interest to this way of sporting. It should be borne in mind also, that when a covey of partridges is caught they are not injured, and the sportsman can set at liberty all that he does not require; whereas in shooting, very many birds are, of necessity, uselessly wounded and left to perish.

The system of netting partridges at night time, as it is carried on by the poachers in some parts of England, is most destructive; and unless checked is certain to clear the country of all its birds. The only way to prevent this silent and wholesale robbery is to stake and bush the grass-fields. Partridges when undisturbed roost, or rather sleep, regularly in the smoothest grass or barest stubble.

They seem to feel more security with an open expanse around them than in any kind of concealment. The whole covey sits crouched in a space that might almost be covered with a hat, so closely are they huddled together. After having made their evening meal in the stubbles, which they always do, in the autumn and winter, between the hours of three and five, the old birds call their brood and collect them together; they then fly off to some grass-field or other very bare ground, and having run about, apparently in play, for a little while, as soon as the light begins to fail they fly off to some favourite spot in the field, and, huddling up together in a furrow, take up their quarters for the night. Unluckily all this is done with a great deal of noise; the birds constantly calling to and answering each other, and running to and fro with their heads most conspicuously erect, thus plainly showing the netting-poacher, who is sure to be on the look-out, where he may expect the best luck during the night. While this work is being carried on, you may see some fellow, often dressed more like a schoolmaster than a poacher, lounging listlessly about the lanes, leaning against the gates and smoking his pipe. You never suspect that any sporting propensities can be concealed under the high-crowned beaver and swallow-

tailed coat of this classical-looking gentleman, who seems to be merely enjoying the beauty of the evening, although all the while he is watching with the eyes of a lynx the unsuspecting partridges as they run about calling to each other preparatory to going to roost. The fellow is thus able to form a pretty good guess as to where half-a-dozen coveys may be netted; and he returns to his confederate, who in the meantime has been equally usefully employed at some alehouse or elsewhere in preparing and mending the nets. "Dressing" for the occasion, as it is termed, is now become by no means an uncommon practice near large towns in England, and many a pheasant preserve is laid waste by Methodist parson-like fellows, whose black coat-pockets and clerical-looking hats contain, instead of sermons, neatly-coiled piles of horsehair nooses ready tied on a line long enough to be run across a large extent of cover, at the favourable moment when the keeper, of whom they have just asked the way to the rectory, has gone about his business in some other direction.

By such means as these a great part of the game is obtained which we see hung up in such immense quantities in all the poulterers' shops. A game-keeper cannot be too curious and inquisitive as to the business and movements of all strangers about

his ground, whether dressed in a fustian jacket and leather leggings, in a rusty suit of black, or in a blue swallow-tail with gilt buttons. By watching unseen an idler of this sort, a keeper may frequently find out some projected manœuvre against his pheasants and partridges.

There has been of late a great cry out against game and game-laws, gamekeepers and game-preservers. In fact, the mere word "game" is sufficient to excite the bilious indignation of half the newspapers in the United Kingdom, and more especially of those whose claims to popularity are founded on the loudness and virulence of their abuse of what they term "the aristocracy of the kingdom."

I am very far from being an advocate for carrying out the system of preserving game to the extent which is frequently done, where woods as full of pheasants as a poultry-yard is of chickens afford no real sport, and where, instead of the amusement of hunting for and finding your game, your only employment is the mere act of shooting them, the birds and hares being as tame and as easy to kill as so many domestic fowls. At the same time, if proprietors like to go to the expense and trouble of keeping innumerable pheasants and hares, I cannot see why they should not be allowed to

indulge their taste, without being held up to public censure by those whose taste happens to be different, as is so frequently the case.

It is not the farmers who complain of the game: they have a fair and I believe a legal right to compensation for all the mischief it does them; and I do not think that this claim is often, if ever, refused to be acknowledged by the game-preserver. In fact, it is his interest to keep on good terms with the occupier of the land, even if his sense of justice did not induce him to do so, as the farmer and tenant are able to destroy more game, in the shape of eggs and young birds, during the breeding season, than the proprietor and all his friends could shoot in a twelvemonth. They can do this, too, without exposing themselves to any risk of paying penalty for infraction of the game-laws. As far as my own experience extends, I have never found tenants looking upon the preservation of game as so great a nuisance and source of loss as they are represented to do by many writers on the subject, who for the most part advance as facts statements which are either utterly untrue, or, at the best, are twisted and exaggerated to serve their own purposes. Leases are always entered into by farmers with their eyes well open to every chance of loss which they are likely to sustain from the game,

and stipulations are made accordingly. In fact, the proprietor of the game is almost invariably the person who, directly or indirectly, pays for its keep: this price it is right that he should pay for his amusement, and the cases, I believe, are very rare in which any objection is made to doing so.

In considering this subject, it should also be borne in mind that in these days game is a source of profit and income to so many persons that it ought to be under legal protection, as much so as any other kind of property. The trespasser in pursuit of game renders himself liable to certain penalties with as perfect a knowledge of the risk he runs as the man who steals from the hen-roost. It is often argued that poaching is the first step to many worse crimes; so is picking pockets. Pheasants are great temptations, and so are pocket-handkerchiefs; and a man has as much right to breed pheasants in his woods as to walk down the Strand with a silk pocket-handkerchief in his pocket. It is very true that the pheasant-stealer may become a highwayman, and in like manner the picker of pockets may become a burglar; but in neither case should the minor crime be permitted to go unpunished in a vain hope of decreasing the frequency of the greater. Men are very seldom impelled by actual want to take up poaching as

a trade; they are almost always led to it by a natural lawlessness of disposition and a disinclination to labour, or else by a wish to earn the means of indulging in drinking and low profligacy, in the same manner as the young Levi or Moses who picks your pocket spends the proceeds of his booty in some den of infamy in town. I allude, of course, in all I have said, not to the illegal follower of game who is led to do wrong by sportsman-like feelings, but to the desperate and systematic poacher who acts from mere love of gain and an utter contempt of right and law, and who too frequently would as soon maltreat or kill a gamekeeper who performs his honest duty, as he would shoot a hare. The savage encounters that occasionally occur are invariably commenced by the most lawless and dissolute class of poachers, whose sole object is plunder, and who have not a particle of that love of sport in their composition which so frequently leads the comparatively blameless trespasser into the hands of the law.

I have entered perhaps too far into a worn-out and unpleasant subject, but I have been led to do so by the honest conviction that, *in property of this sort at least*, every man has a right to "do what he likes with his own," provided his neighbour does not suffer thereby.

Rabbits and hares are, like winged game, subject to epidemics, which frequently carry off great numbers. Their diseases can generally be traced to the wet weather or other obvious causes, though sometimes, indeed, these animals disappear almost entirely from a district without any ostensible cause; whether they migrate or perish by disease is a mystery.

Of late years the mountain-hares in Scotland have increased in some places to an almost incredible degree, and hare-shooting in the mountains has occasionally taken the place of grouse-shooting, the birds having died off, while the hares have flourished. Grouse and the mountain-hare feed on very nearly the same food. This circumstance tends to corroborate the supposition that the epidemic amongst grouse is by no means occasioned by any failure in the growth of the heather.

In many parts of Scotland an old blackcock is almost uneatable, his flesh having so strong a flavour of juniper: where, however, this plant does not abound, the black game, feeding on grain and other seeds, are as good for the table as any other kind of game. Although the blackcock and capercailzie frequently breed together, and mules between the pheasant and black grouse are, though rare, occasionally seen, I have very rarely found

a well-authenticated case of a mule bird bred between the grouse and blackcock being killed. In most instances in which birds supposed to be hybrids between these two species have fallen under my observation, they appeared to me to be merely gray hens, whose plumage had become like that of the cock. I have seen birds of this kind in the Edinburgh Museum and elsewhere; and I saw one killed this autumn (1848), which had very much the appearance of a hybrid, but on closer examination I came to the conclusion that it was merely an old gray hen, who had changed her appearance, as the hen-pheasant does. This latter bird, we all know, is very frequently killed in different stages of change towards the male plumage. The same is the case with the common domestic fowl and the peahen. It is difficult to account for the cause of this transformation. We know that it does not arise from any disease or ill-health, as the birds in their borrowed plumage are always in as good condition as any others.

It is very rare indeed to find any wild animal subject to illness, with the exception of the epidemics before alluded to. Unless they are wounded and unable to hunt for their own food, all wild birds and animals keep themselves plump and healthy. The wood-pigeon is indeed frequently

subject to a kind of cancer and growth on their bills and about the eyes, which eventually destroys them; but I attribute this disease to feeding on the beech-mast, which is probably too heating a food for the young birds. The old wood-pigeons are seldom if ever attacked by this disease, notwithstanding their great fondness for beech-mast and acorns.

Wood-pigeons are not so much valued for the larder as they deserve to be. They are excellent eating at all seasons, excepting when driven by snow to feed on the turnip leaves. Since the destruction of vermin and the increase of fir plantations, they have grown very numerous in many parts of the country, where, a few years ago, they were comparatively rare. It is, however, difficult to kill many of them during the winter and autumn, when they are collected in flocks, their safety resulting rather from their timidity than from any excess of cunning.

Most birds, while feeding in flocks, appoint sentinels, whose duties appear to be perfectly understood, as well by the guards as by the guarded: red-deer, too, whilst resting, usually place a young stag as sentinel, and do not allow him to lie down or leave off his vigilant watching, which often lasts a considerable time. Those at rest appear to be

perfectly unconcerned and at their ease, and to depend entirely on the watchful eyes and ears of their sentry.

In the same way wild-geese, while feeding on the open fields, invariably leave one bird to keep watch, and most faithfully does she perform this duty. Keeping on some high spot of the field she stands with neck perfectly erect, watching on all sides, and listening to every sound far or near. Nor does she attempt to snatch at a single grain, however hungry she may be, till one of her comrades thinks fit to relieve her guard; and then the former sentinel sets to work at her feeding with an eagerness which shows that her abstinence while on duty was the result not of want of appetite, but of a proper sense of the important trust imposed on her. If any enemy or the slightest cause of suspicion appears, the sentry utters a low croak, when the whole flock immediately run up to her, and, after a short consultation, fly off, leaving the unfortunate sportsman to lament having shown the button of his cap or the muzzle of his gun above the bank of the ditch, along which he had perhaps been creeping, "suadente diabolo," for the last half-hour up to his knees in water, well iced to the temperature of a Scotch morning in February. Thus also wild-ducks, curlews, crows, and almost all birds when feeding in

flocks, leave sentries, on whose vigilance the rest entirely depend, taking no heed of anything around them, but feeding in conscious safety. Nor is it necessary for a cry of alarm to be given, as the flock perfectly understand what is going on by the actions or looks of the one who is watching, distinguishing at once whether the sentry is intent on some sound or object at a distance, or whether the danger is imminent and pressing. It is not only by the voice and action of birds of *their own* kind that flocks of wild-fowl guide their actions: the startled movement or cry of a redshank or peewit is sufficient to put on wing a whole flock of geese or ducks instantaneously, and also to tell exactly from what point the danger is to be apprehended.