

TAKING A MOOR.



IN taking a moor and making the necessary preparations for sport, it is well for one to be careful, for Highland grouse-lairds have a little bit of the old Highland cateran left in them, and do not disdain to rob the Sassenach any more indeed than they would to swallow a drop of good Scotch whiskey. Everyone who has read Mr. Jean's capital little book, "The Tommiebeg Shootings," must recollect well how the advertisement was so temptingly worded; how "fishing was to be had," and all that, and how it turned out that the only true thing carried out in the compact was the lifting of the rent. Things have changed in the Highlands somewhat since then; grouse-shooting has become more fashionable, and rents have risen, but Tommiebeg is still in the market. The auld laird may have "deid," and the auld factor may have "jist slippit awa the auld body-man," but they have left able successors, who will guarantee anything in the way of sport, be it shooting or fishing, and let the unfortunate lessee find out that he has been let in to a considerable tune for the privilege of looking at the skeletons of dead birds on a bleak piece of heather all day; to lie in a damp, half-slated old lodge or castle—they are great in castles in the Highlands—all night, disturbed by the numerous bogles which are rent-free inmates of such places, if Dugald and Donald are at all to be believed. In the Tommiebeg it was customary, however, for the laird or his Edinburgh agent or factor to manage the grouse-letting; now it has been mostly placed in the hands of London agents, who make, indeed, the letting of grouse-farms and salmon-fishings the sole business of their lives. The advantage so far has not been so much in favour of the sportsman as of the laird, the keen competition on the actual spot, not the heather, having roused an all-round rise in rents. Twenty years ago one could have got plenty of grouse to kill at a shilling a brace; ten years ago the price rose to about half-a-guinea; and this year there seems to be plenty of sportsmen and non-sportsmen who take a moor because it is the thing, quite willing to go over a guinea, a price at which, it is needless to

state, the sport is very dear if you leave out the grand caller Highland air and the exercise. The first questions possibly the grouse-agent will ask the intending sportsman will be—"How many guns are of the party? Do you want a lodge? Will there be ladies of the party?" And so on. All this information he can readily furnish, as, on forms which he has supplied to the factors or lairds, has been returned everything which should be true about the shooting, but which in many cases is the "Scotch mile and a bittock" off the line of accuracy. It is therefore necessary that some inquiry should be made as to who shot over it the previous season, and why he does not care to go in for it this year. Possibly he may be wishing for a change, or has become "gun shy," it having been his first experience; but it is just as likely to be the case that he found the birds few and far between, the "lovely situation in a charming valley" barely up to his idea of the picturesque, and "The Cawstle" in a somewhat dilapidated condition. Possibly he was a good shot, and over-killed the number allowed by careful work and hard walking, and possibly he was that worst of all grouse-tenants, a wholesale game dealer, who paid the rent with a cheque on the Leadenhall-street branch of the London and Westminster Bank. If so, he knew that he was not likely to have as many birds as formerly, and so shifted to fresh pastures or, rather, better stocked heather, leaving the fresh tenant to gather particulars about the style in which the place had been "scutched," to use a Scotch agricultural expression, for purging the land, during the last years of the lease. The best thing one can do who is anxious to have good sport for himself and his friends, and not a mere home in the Highlands, is to find out the name of some game-keeper in the neighbourhood, not too near, and to send him over it as soon as he can with a brace of dogs and report as to the likelihood of sport, the lay of the ground, if a hill-moor, if the walking is heavy (stout men and elderly men should always learn this in good time), and what sort of bags are likely to be made in the first fortnight over dogs, as it may fairly well be presumed that if birds are strong on the wing on the Twelfth they will be somewhat wild by the 24th. If the ground is not very suitable for driving, then keen shots, who like this form of the sport better than that behind dogs or walking up, will like to know, as if the drives are uncertain big bags will not very

easily be made at the end of the season, and there will be many days of disappointment quite as enjoyable in other ways as blank days in the hunting-field. This, an able and trustworthy gamekeeper would be ready to furnish for a pound or two, and no one who means to spend a hundred or two should grudge that for the information furnished. There should, however, be no delay about it, as Jones or Robinson, of the Stock Exchange, will jump in as he would into a speculation in shares, and take his chance of sport, grouse-shooting not being to either such an object as wearing a kilt and sporting a sporran. These, indeed, are the men who have made Highland sport dear, and placed it quite out of the reach of the old class, who might be classed as "single dog" men. The lodge, of course, should be carefully looked to, and the roof and walls carefully examined, as snow-storms in the North are long and severe, while mountain-torrents do not at times stick to their courses, and have little regard for doors or windows. Damp walls, be it remembered, are difficult to dry where only peat fuel can be had, and no one likes to be in a damp house on a wet day who has ever had a twinge of rheumatism. But the thing most neglected in taking grouse moors is the sanitation, and lodges are taken which a sanitary inspector in four out of five cases would condemn. The drains in many places lead into dangerous cesspools not far from the windows, where sewage-gas is generated, and the seeds of fever sown, to be carried back to the town houses, there to work havoc and have the town drains blamed for it; for, of course, "the Highlands are so healthy it could not be the Highlands, you know." The drainage of the lodge, the supply of water, and, equally important, the supply of fuel should be amongst the first things looked to. As regards the latter, it is as well to have it guaranteed. A noted southern sportsman, a well-known M.F.H., told me that his first work on the morning of the Twelfth at a lodge in Invernessshire once was the gathering of drift-wood at the riverside to raise a fire for the cooking of his breakfast; and I have had somewhat similar experiences. After the moor has been taken, if the keeper, as is mostly the case nowadays, is not let with it, it will be well to see as to getting hold of a good one; not a big, heavy, hulking fellow, who can merely carry a bag, but a smart, intelligent man, who can feed and manage his dogs well, and take a delight in

seeing them working in the field. He should always be knacky in boxing game, in which there is a great art, though the best I ever saw at that was not a gamekeeper at all.

“Who or what is he?” I asked my host, a northern merchant, who was standing superintending the operations on the evening of the Twelfth; “he does not know much about game, but seems handy with the hammer and that.”

“He’s one of my packing-box makers,” was the reply. “He’s not very strong, poor fellow, but he can carry a light bag on the hill, and is capital at this, while the fresh air seems to brace him up for the winter.”

The arrangement was as good as it was kindly, and no doubt many a poor carpenter would be glad to try a fortnight carrying a bag on the heather, and relieving the keeper of the evening’s work of packing boxes of game. Still, the good gamekeeper should be able to do this, and many other things besides, such as looking after the waterpipes, keeping the lawn-tennis ground in order, mending the loch-coble, splicing a fishing-rod, or dressing a fly, in addition to the other work required of him. Such a man if civil and courteous, with a kindly word to every shepherd, is invaluable, and, it is needless to state, is not every day to be had. The proximity of a place of worship will be inquired for by many and the distance of the lodge from the railway-station, the doctor’s house, &c., will all be asked for, as well as numerous little bits of information which I need not here enumerate. Many people arrange to have goods or medicines sent from the large cities, and the time taken between the lodge and warehouse by post or rail should be known. Cartridges have frequently to be telegraphed for, and, as only a certain number are allowed under the Explosives Act to be sent by passenger-train, this always should be kept in mind; while a supply of powder, shot, and empty shells should always be at hand if required. By studying a few of these things beforehand, the sportsman may avoid many disappointments on The Twelfth and following days.