

THE FIRST OF SEPTEMBER.



HARVEST was early in the year 187-. The cereals had grown well, and been early in the blade, and a scorching sunshine during the dog-days had changed what had been a waving mass of green into a long plain of yellow, in one of the sweetest of Yorkshire vales, in the course of a fortnight. Farmers—the acknowledged champions of grumbling—were grumbling because they had actually nothing to complain about, and stewards met their landlords with smiling faces, which seemed to say, “A little more of this sort of thing and there will be no need for abatements.” When people look into the happy, smiling face of Nature they are forced to smile and look happy too; and so they did that year in the little Vale of Beckham, where everyone was cheery, from the village pedagogue, who dismissed his scholars to let them work in the fields, down to the little “yokeling” who was just learning his letters, and with whom ever afterwards harvest would be associated with holidays and with pleasure. The hay, too, had been well secured; the turnips had escaped the fly, and were a strong-growing and a healthy crop; and the only fear which existed regarding the potatoes was that they might prove too numerous, and that a good price would not be obtainable for them. Matters, these, of small importance to the City man; matters, these, however, of vital interest to the folks of the country. Poor crop, short rent to the landlord; and poor crop, small pittance to the people. Hunger was, no doubt, the first Radical, and he comes to the platform every year yet when short harvests are the cause of empty bellies.

It was, therefore, satisfactory to see on all sides, as we drove through the Vale mentioned, the signs of plenty, and that great progress had been made with the work of harvesting. Broad acres of wheat stood in stacks, and broad acres had been bared, the ragged, rough edges of the newly-built cones in the farm-yard showing that all hands about the homestead had been busy in the work of leading. Still, there were a good many acres

which had to fall to the reaper, and one could readily see that the newly-flushed coveys would find shelter in many places where dog and man would not be allowed to follow, for grain must always come under consideration before game, privileged as a sportsman may be to wade through mangolds or swedes. Still, in the cool morning air, in which there was a slight touch of that early autumn frost which nips the leaves, we could see that there was quite enough of ground bare to allow of our making a fair bag, though it must be said the 1st of September is a little too early for partridge-shooting generally.

With a smart rattle downhill, we were soon at the approach which led to the keeper's lodge. We were London sportsmen who held no lease, and therefore his (the keeper's) home in the woodlands was our headquarters. We found him, along with a brace of light lemon-coloured pointers, all in readiness for the day's work.

"Good morning, gen'men," was his salute, as he touched his cap respectfully; "you've brought down good Lunnon weather with you, at any rate."

"Good morning, Luke; but you seem to have had it pretty fair here for some time past, judging from the forward condition of the harvest."

"Well, nowt to complain of, sir; but there's a lot of uncut stuff on the land yet, and it don't do nowadays for farmers to holler till they have all into the barnyard. Howsoever, there's no want o' birds this year, and, so far as I've seen, there's a good stock o' hares, so you won't want for sport, at any rate. If I only saw all the stuff down, and the pheasants clear of the reapers, I'd feel kind o' happy. But they're a deuced sight worse than telegraph-wires was ever on partridges; and you know, sir, what a howl they made about them when they were first stretched."

"But how does the reaper kill 'em, Luke?" asked my friend, who had little country experience.

"Bless you, sir, the simplest thing in the world. If it's the mower, see, in haytime, it just goes along *click, click*, and the old hen sits watching the drivers and horses till her neck is between the finger-bars of the cutting-board. *Click* goes the knife, and away she goes at the neck. Well, with the reaper,

old and young, both partridges and pheasants, sit still till their heads are cut off sometimes; ay, and I've know'd hares and rabbits lie till they were torn in two. There are lots of such cases as I have seed, and there are hundreds I don't hear of 'cause the harvesters, you see, when they get the dead birds say nowt about 'em; they just put 'em in the sheaves, and slip 'em home to the pot the quietest way they can."

"And can you do nothing to prevent it?"

"Nowt! You can't be on twenty farms at once; and if you did, you couldn't walk up and down the growing stuff in front of every reaper. If they'd only stick in some long blunt bars, to wake up game a bit ahead of the knife, it would do good, it would; but gamekeepers' opinions ain't much respected nowadays nowhere, so it's no use talking."

While he was discoursing on his favourite subject, his assistant was busy getting out our guns from their cases, and putting them together, while we buttoned on our gaiters over heavy shooting-boots. At a quarter to nine o'clock the old keeper led the way through a narrow belting of larch, across a grass field rough with rag-weeds, to a stretch of wheat-stubble, shaved as close down as if done with a lawn-mower, the sown-down grass having in the few days since cut overtopped the shorn stumps of the straw. There was barely as much cover left as would shelter a field-mouse, and it seemed madness to put the dogs over it. Partridges, however, feed close to the ground, and have the knack of squatting still closer—indeed, many times they will literally crouch out of a man's sight altogether. In the furrows (as a rule *now* farmers do not care for furrows in wheat-lands, save in cases where the soil has to be gathered into ridges, to allow the water to run off), the stubbles were long and straggling, the reaper not being able to bend down to them, and from one of these, as soon as we crossed the stile, a grand covey of nine strong birds rose, and, skimming the hedge ahead, drooped, and disappeared out of sight—"just where," as old Luke remarked, he "wanted 'em to go: Farmer Johnstone's turnips." Scarcely had we marked them over the hedge than, thirty yards ahead, a hare jumped up from his form, into which he had literally been served, and was bowled over with the contents of my friend's right-barrel, delivered just behind the ears, the place where the weasel himself would have

chosen. All ground-game, it is needless to state, should be shot well forward, for a miss past the nose is preferable even to the sight of a poor animal dragging itself away from you with crippled loins and broken hind legs. Who that has been rabbit-shooting over ferrets has not regretted seeing a poor coney, with the contents of two or more barrels, drag itself into a hole to die and be lost, and, not only that, spoil a clean burrow, for the ferret, if you put the latter in afterwards, would keep working at him, and lie up for hours. First blood having been drawn, and poor Puss transferred to the bag, old Luke wisely resolved to keep his dogs to heel, the field being so bare, and beat across it for any other odd hares which might be lying in the long stubble furrows, putting at the same time such birds as might be about into the green crops ahead. Three more hares joined their dead companion, a fourth stealing away, and two more coveys which we flushed went on into the forty-acre field ahead. Passing through the gateway, we swept round to the left, so as to work the outside of the March boundary first and keep them all inside. There was not as much wind about as would blow our smoke away (Schultze was not then invented), so we kept our backs as well as we could to the sun, which was now beginning to glare fiercely, and glance off the gun-barrels. Luke soon had his pointers well under command, though at first they exhibited a little wildness, and began to range wide. A mild rating steadied them, *and better*. Just as the old dog wheeled to the left up a drill, going grandly with head up, he stopped as if he had been put under the pressure of a Westinghouse air-brake.

“Ho, Pedro! Ho!” was the call of the old keeper. “Steady! Juno, steady! Now get forward gentlemen. Mark the birds, away, Hugh!” (to his assistant) “and I’ll mark the birds that are down.”

It is the opening day, and the opening covey of the season, and we believe in omens. We have had indifferent seasons with grouse which were opened with misses; and so, too, we have had good seasons which we began by scoring to the right and left. The old dog begins to move first one foot slowly forward as we close, and we can see from the fixed stare of his eyes, and the way his nostrils are literally dilated with the scent, that they are almost under him, if they are not running. Whirr-r!

There they are, with mother-hen in the middle, going off *veek!* *veek!* *veek!* No firing into the bosom of them! Be a sportsman, and not a sparrow-potter of Putney Heath." The outside bird is down to your right sharply, and as they go away, you choose the next with the left, and have the satisfaction of seeing it come down also. How has your friend fared? He killed with his first, but you find him staring through the haze to look after the effects of his second. Yes; there goes a bird, heavy hit and taking a different road from his mates. What is wrong? Well, he is simply choking with the blood from his heart, and is gasping for air like a suffocating man. Where he flies he cares not. Now he begins to fly upward, and *up, up* he goes like a lark; *up*, till he is almost a hundred feet high, and then dead he topples to the ground. He is what is known as a towering partridge, a puzzle often to young shots, who think that it is something very uncommon. The under-keeper has marked the place where he fell, and will pick him up at leisure. In the meantime, the birds which have been killed at hand have to be picked up, the dogs still crouching to the order, "Down charge!" Having recharged, they hold up again, in case there should be a stray bird left; but we find them all away, and the call is, "Seek dead!" This is not always an easy matter with birds in turnips, which are only winged, as they run very fast up or down the drills, and so bother, and, indeed, sometimes help to spoil good dogs. In our case they are easily lifted and transferred to the bag. Walking carefully, so as not to smash down the haulms of the turnips, for the haulms are the lungs of the plant, we hold on our beat, and soon have the dogs standing before us statue-like as before. A brace and a half fall this time, and we succeed in scattering the covey, so that we are enabled to pick up an odd one here and there in a nice handy manner. Out of the forty-acre field we secure $6\frac{1}{2}$ brace and three hares, not a big bag, as some bags go, but a well-made one and one which we have enjoyed the making of.

Lunching at one o'clock in a shady nook, we have time to enjoy the beauties of the surrounding landscape, the changing foliage of the woodlands afar away beyond the yellow corn, along the top of which we can see driving along steadily the modern reaper, with its monotonous *click, click*, a poor substitute for the song of him who handled his hook so deftly in the days of

old. Voices nearer home call attention to the stack in the farm-yard, which has risen since the morning above the hedgerows, and is now on a level with the trees, and over all comes faintly the sound of a huntsman's horn. Straining our eyes in the direction of old Luke's finger, we can see far away on the dip of the horizon the figures of two or three horses, and a dark mass on the edge of a plantation.

"The P—— cub hunting," says the old man, quietly, "and the huntsman blooding the young hounds." Our repast finished, also a smoke, we commence work again, and in the shades of evening, when the autumn mists are hanging grey as from the smoke of our guns in the drift, we draw our cartridges and finish, with $14\frac{1}{2}$ brace and six hares, a most enjoyable First of September.

