


WHITE HARE SHOOTING ON LOCH KATRINE SIDE.

“ CANNA lee my Highland hame,” we hear Duncan singing in the little boat-house by the loch-side as we stroll on to the lawn in front of the lodge after breakfast ; and, in truth, as we look around we do not wonder at hearing him express this opinion. The hills are brown, the larch woodlands all bare, and there is not one vestige of autumn glory left, but trailing mists, which come creeping, serpent-like, through the glens, or rising slowly up the face of the mountains ; but sharp snow-clad peaks, shining in the sun away beyond a lake of silver at your feet, and an atmosphere which is so clear that you feel the upper buttons in your vest beginning to crack, compensate for all the colours which delight the scenic artist. There are no birds to give us an opening carol, but the grouse-cock is crowing away happily, and sportsmen do not wish to hearken to sweeter music. Bah ! talk about the Highlands of Scotland in autumn ; you should see them in a clear, crisp morning in November or December, when the frost-wreaths are across the window-panes, and everything is a mass of fretted silver-work, shining now red, now pink, now golden in the sunlight.

But we had little time to stand and gaze at the scenery, for Duncan made his appearance from amongst the copsewood behind, whistling the remainder of the Highland air, and with customary Highland politeness bade us good-morning. No sooner had he done so than he suddenly motioned us to be silent. Pointing up the hill with his finger, he said, “Do you not see a blackcock sitting on the tree there ?” Though we were scarce as certain of its being a blackcock as he was, seeing that from his habitually having to scan the hills around morning after morning he could detect anything strange on tree or hillock at a quarter of a mile’s distance, we saw something dark, and the youngest of our party, who was as keen as a Highland fox-terrier for sport, was soon shoving a brace of cartridges into his gun, which had been standing in the corner by the doorway. The

keeper having directed him how to proceed in his stalk, we saw him get into a little ravine, and waited and watched anxiously. About ten minutes after he had gone out of sight, we saw that the black mark was something possessing life, as it rose into clearer view, and there was a puff of blue smoke and a bang. We watched to see if it had gone away, as we were certain our sportsman was a little too late. The blackcock when he leaves his perch, by reason of his own weight sinks a little, and so one is very apt to miss him just as he starts off. Our youthful friend was in good time, however, for in a minute or two he reappeared, triumphantly waving his trophy, a grand old cock, which had been enjoying a morning reverie in quietness.

“And now, Duncan, how about the white hares? have you men enough for a drive?”

“Shentlemen, if you’re ready, I’m ready, and the beaters iss ready, and the hares iss ready too,” was the old Highlander’s reply. “And so if you will get your guns we’ll pull down the loch in the boat, because we will not be able to take the hill here. They are all waiting at the ferry with Donald.”

As we had a long climb before us, we lost no time in getting hold of our guns, and, with cartridge-bags pretty well crammed, and a couple of hampers laden with all that was good and strong, for we well knew how the Highland keepers and gillies would welcome a bite and a dram, we got down to the boat-house, and soon were leaving a gentle wake behind our wherry as we pulled along the oak-fringed beach, where the wash at times from our oars went away bubbling up amongst the exposed roots which mark the winter flood-tide of the inland lake when the mountain-burns have been rolling in fierce spate for days. Now and then we would pass over a spot where the old keeper had lifted a good trout, for he was a keen fisher, and at another place would scan the trees closely as if expecting some blackcock like our friend of the morning to be making a quiet survey. As he pulled, our young friend in the bow struck up a song, which was more full of Lowland than of Highland sympathy. It was the song of

THE GAMEKEEPER.

Deep in the dusk of the woodland glade,
I live beneath an oak-tree’s shade,
Where we hear the sound of whirring wings,
As the golden pheasant upward springs ;

There the livelong day
Do I sing and say
My lord full gay may live for aye ;
But there are none within his hall
Who live so free or so jolly as me,
In my cot beneath the old oak-tree,
For I am keeper of all—of all,
For I am keeper of all.
From early morn till setting sun,
With faithful dog and trusty gun,
I roam at will o'er moors and fells,
Through golden fields or fragrant dells.
And all day long
With joke and song
I smile at my lord to whom they belong.
May not his lot me e'er befall,
If he's rents to lift he has debts to pay,
And he's never without his cares they say
While I am keeper of all—of all,
While I am keeper of all.

And when the moon is shining bright,
And new-gleaned fields are gleaming white,
As the skulking poachers set their snares,
I crouch upon them unawares.
With many a thwack
Does my cudgel crack,
Till heads are broken, and bruised, and black,
And we've wrestled many a fall.
But they find in me an opponent tough,
And I laugh, ha, ha, when they cry enough.
For I am keeper of all—of all,
For I am keeper of all,

Rounding a little wooded promontory, the call came to pull easy, and in a few minutes afterwards Donald, the assistant-keeper, was helping us vigorously to get our wherry up on to the beach. Guns out, cartridge-bags on shoulder, and the hampers in the possession of two stout shepherds, the merry twinkle in the eyes of whom showed that they divined their contents, and we were soon on our way up the hill.

Our beaters were a very mixed-looking lot indeed. Some were shepherds, some rabbit-catchers, some woodmen, and a few were peelers of oak-bark for chemical purposes. It was a High-

land clan, indeed, in the uniform of Falstaff's army, for the needle had been hard plied on trew and kilt, as many a square or angular patch testified. Still, they all seemed to be happy and comfortable, and a carefully-divided supply of tobacco set their pipes into full reek and their tongues into endless wagging, their conversation being nearly all about dogs, guns, fishing-cobles, and fishing-lines. Toilsome indeed was the road to trace as that of Fitzjames ; but, with guns under our arms, we stepped out boldly, and breasted ridge after ridge till we came to points where the ice lay in long boulders, caught by the frost and congealed gradually just as it bubbled from the mountain-springs. A snow-shower which drove hard across us did not make the atmosphere more comfortable, but, as it was not of long duration, we did not mind it very much.

"And now, shentlemen," said the old keeper, "we will petter get up to the passes, and the peaters will sweep round the foot of the hill. There iss hares in plenty here, and hares always run up the hill."

After giving directions for the beat to the leading shepherds in Gaelic, he led the way, and we started on another and weary climb, which, however, subsequent experience proved was not as uncomfortable as the halt at the end of it. The cold wind was sweeping across the mountain pretty stiff, sending the snow flying in thin powder from the wreaths, when, accompanied by Duncan, I left what looked the main mountain-path, and scrambled to what was to be my position, the point of a peak or ridge at the head of a ravine which widened as it descended. Here, with the keeper by my side, I crouched, pipe in mouth, and waited for the coming of these little white-furred wanderers, which seem to think that there is safety to be found from every pursuer in the mountain-tops. The gun-barrels were too cold for contact with my hand, so I laid my weapon down, flapped my arms across my breast, unscrewed the flask, and shared a wee drap with the keeper, who seemed as cold as myself. Battue-shooting on a camp-stool, with a brandy and soda by your side, may be all very well for your Sybarite, but he would take very unkindly to a cold boulder-stone seat amongst snow 2,000 feet high in the teeth of a piercing east wind. There was plenty of beautiful scenery up there for one to go raving mad about, but no scene could come home to one's



"Marked"!

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mind as a picture save that of a blazing coal fire with some glasses and a bottle on the table, and a kettle singing on the hob. After an hour—a frozen hour, which is equal to two in a thaw—had passed, we heard a yelping of dogs away down in the ravine, followed at times by an unmistakable Gaelic yell. Duncan, with his bonnet off, crept cannily forward over the stones and peered away down amongst the frosty mist for a time. Returning, he motioned me to get ready with my gun—a work of some difficulty, for my forefinger had either got benumbed or my right-hand had lost its cunning. A thump or two on my leg brought back the circulation, and not too soon.

“Here they come, keep doon!” cried the young keeper. “Be quick with your second barrel, for they will bolt like rabbits—mark!”

“Marked” the little mountaineer was, for he turned a double somersault as neat as a circus-rider over six horses, while his neighbour, who had halted, reversed the feat by falling backwards downhill.

Refilling from my jacket-pocket, I was troubled with that worst of all nuisances—a malformed shell, which went in all but the eighth part of an inch and then jammed. Re-lock the barrels I could not, and, with fingers and thumb benumbed, I found it impossible to get it out again. Having no extractor, I passed the gun to the keeper, who, to my momentary surprise, instead of using his fingers, flung the barrels back, seized the shell with his teeth, and drew it as a terrier would a badger. Making a memorandum to see all cartridges fitted two by two in future for such work, I got a fresh charge home in the left, and soon had the satisfaction of seeing another couple roll over dead. The cry, however, was “still they come,” sometimes hopping along singly as if suspicious that things were not all right, sometimes in pairs, which would halt and listen right opposite and hearken for the sounds of the beaters, just as would a fox for the voices of his pursuers. The sport was not all confined to our own corners, however, for a heavy fusillade was going on both on the right and left, the poor hares evidently having a bad time of it on every hand. Their safety evidently did not lie in the mountain-tops on that particular day. The first rush of them being well over, a stray one made its appearance and met its fate, till a colley dog, at the tail of the last, whipped up, and we knew the beaters were at hand.

Gathering our dead, we find that we have, opposite our little fortress, the respectable lot of nineteen, and, closing on our centre and causing a full muster, we find that the dead in all number sixty-nine head. The hampers having been unpacked, and the contents disposed of, there is time for another short drive on the far side of the hill. From this we get thirty-seven more, so that when the slain are counted at the foot of the mountain the death total amounts to 106—a fair day's work, all will say, for four guns.

Leaving the slain at the Ferry Lodge in charge of Duncan, we launch our wherry again, and in the teeth of a snow-shower which promises to be the first of a storm, we bend hard to the oars, and soon are dusting the white powder from our coats in the little boat-house, while we watch the red glow blinking through the snow-laden casements of the lodge-window to tell us of comfort and good cheer after our day's sport on the mountain-tops.

