

SHOOTING WILD ROCK-PIGEONS; OR, SPORT IN LORD REAY'S COUNTRY.



HERE has been so much said and written about sport which is of a contradictory nature that it would be hard to define what a sportsman really is. "He can't be a racing man," says one, "for he really looks on at the game." "He is not an angler," says another, "or he would not impale a worm on a hook and then torture a trout, which is unsportsmanlike." "He must not hunt the poor fox, though the fox likes it," says a third. "And just consider the cruelty of coursing a hare," exclaims a fourth. And so on, till one is forced to the conclusion that Marwood must be the only legitimate sportsman we have. To define what is cruel in sport and to define what is unsportsmanlike is a very different thing; but through ignorance the two problems have been confounded. If the sticklers who are always searching out for cases of cruelty to animals were to devote half of the time they do to watching the poor over-beaten horses in the streets, thrashed when they fall into a struggle to rise, or protesting against that abomination of the age, the hideous spring-trap, they would have quite enough on their hands without getting sentimental over cruelties in our pastimes, which may be altered, but cannot very well be modified.

Not that there are many true sportsmen who will hold up their hands for the shooting of any birds or animals which have been in any sort of way domesticated. The art of venery has always been, and must always be, associated with that which is wild and free; and has ceased, and must cease, with capture or death. This same remark applies to bagged foxes, tame stags, caged hares, and to hand-reared pheasants; and if it has been ably argued in the House that such sports are more cruel than pigeon-shooting, that is all the greater reason that they should be abolished. Of the three sports(?), possibly the last two are the most unsportsmanlike. Pigeon-shooting, conducted on proper principles, might be fruitful of much good in the field, in preventing many of those young shots who

are at present leasing moors in the Highlands from blazing wildly into the brown of newly-flushed coveys, instead of singling out their birds in a clever manner. Such shots are continually raking the air in rear of their game, in the off chance of bringing down something, and leave far more birds to bleed on the bleak heath than the men of Hurlingham do pigeons to bleed on the house-tops. The best system of pigeon-shooting I ever saw was in Scotland, and like all good inventions it was born of necessity, for we had no traps. A dry ditch or brook was fringed roughly with gorse, and in it placed a lad with a basket of birds, whose duty it was to run backwards and forwards, while keeping out of sight, and at the call of "pull" to fling a bird into the air at whatever point in the ditch he happened to be; not at five yards intervals, as in the trap arrangements. The uncertainty of the point of rising, together with the fact that the bird came into view in the half-stride of the wing and gathering way, made the work of killing more difficult, and on the whole fair good practice for *rising* though not for *driven* game was afforded. With a couple of afternoons of such practice, betwixt the 1st and the 12th of August, pigeon-shooting might be made the means of avoiding a vast amount of cruelty on the moors. As to what is cruelty, I daresay every man has a different opinion; but if the Home Secretary can say that there is any class of sport which is more cruel than rabbit-trapping, with the ordinary iron trap, then I will confess to never having seen a pigeon shot or a rabbit caught. I must, however, make haste unto the far north, the land of the Mackays of Reay, not the modern Dutch land of Oppenheim, but the bleak north-west of Scotland, where Cape Wrath like a Viking sentinel of old keeps watch and ward over the stormy Minch.

Railway travelling, as is well known, is a very slow business after you pass Perth on your way north, and the nearer you get to the North Pole the slower it gets. No man needs to be in a hurry after he passes Inverness, and if Carlyle really smoked from London all the way to the Northern Capital, he must have acted wisely in getting out for a fresh store of tobacco if he meant to continue his journey and his smoke. There is not much to stop the train as a rule, but there are worse excuses than that made by the guard to the anxious Cockney passenger on asking if they had come to a station: "That the

driver's wife stops here, sir." Sometimes there is policy in leisure in the Highlands, for many an anxious passenger has grumbled for hours at being cribbed up in the compartment of a carriage to find that at his journey's end there is not a bed to be had for love or money, and that he will have to rough it as best he can. It is then that he wishes he could lean back on the comfortable cushions he has just left.

That, however, was not altogether our experience on going north a few years ago, for we found at the comfortable hotel at Lairg "all the comforts," as Bailie Nicol Jarvie has it, "of the Sautmarket," and little of the hunger and humbug which one meets frequently at hotels on the better patronised tourist routes, where all is flummery and tips for attendance. Though the principal seaport on Loch Shin, Lairg is not much of a town, in fact it is a combined hotel and post office, the latter being a much more wonderful institution in its way than that in London, insomuch as you can get supplied with everything in it, from a halfpenny stamp to a boll of meal. The Reclamation Works, a short distance off, have made it famous all the world over. There you can see now fields of oats and turnips growing where the heather used to wave and the grouse-cock crow; and if you care to wait, a dozen or more of steam engines dragging heavy waggons, hauling sledges laden with boulders, tearing out trees or picking the Duke of Sutherland's teeth—at least, the Duke's toothpick is the name they give a huge anchor-like plough.

Fully a day off our journey's end, at half-past three o'clock next morning we find ourselves rubbing our eyes in front of the Highland "boots," who was appointed to see that no man missed the coach, and, after a hurried breakfast, felt ourselves more wakeful from the strong cup of tea supplied thereat, standing alongside a vehicle, a regular cross between an omnibus and a skeleton brake, watching the driver trying to arrange seats for *seven* and luggage for *fourteen* where there was only room for half. This he managed, much to his own satisfaction but scarcely so to that of his passengers, some of whom had to deposit themselves on the tops of portmanteaus so loosely secured that they had to balance themselves to keep from tumbling off, seats and all, at the curves and corners. Their positions were not made much more comfortable by

occasional thrashings on the cheeks from rowan bushes that fringed the cliffs of the passes down which the driver went most recklessly, quite regardless of a "blind" corner and the possibility of capsizing you sixty feet over a cliff. Shon Ross is, however, a good hand with the rough team he has got, and well knows his road. He is fond of his work and fond of his country; and will tell you, too, with much pride, that there is neither a tree nor a toll nor a thief in all Sutherlandshire. It is a long, wearisome journey up the north side of Loch Shin, with the half-way houses few and far between, and wee draps to keep the mist out, only to be got from the flasks. Skirting Loch Gean and Loch Markland, there is a watershed between the Atlantic and German Ocean, and, passing the Duke of Westminster's shooting-lodge, most pleasantly situated, we get fresh horses a short distance beyond. The drive becomes more picturesque as we hold close by the left of Loch More, and naturally becomes more pleasant with the prospect of our journey nearing its end. In a lovely little glen we meet Rory from Durness with his tandem team, a Shetland pony in front of a half-bred Clydesdale, and take our seats in his trap, while our driver holds on with the remainder of the passengers to the south-west. Sometimes walking, sometimes driving, we get on to Rhiconnel, a little fishing inn, where the venerable landlady holds capital views on temperance, allowing no one more than *one single* refreshment—it may be a gill or it may be a mutchkin. A merry drive of twenty miles more, amidst the wildest of mountain scenery, having had glimpses at times through the gullies of the Minch, and we strike the Grudie, the most distant fishing stream in the mainland of Scotland. Crossing the stone bridge, the Bay of Durness comes into view on the left, with the North Sea away to the N.E., and after a smart rattle we are at the Durness Inn, which is not, however, our resting-place, for our home for the time being is to be the ancient house of Balnakeille, once a residence of the Reay or Mackay family. Changing to the vehicle that is in waiting, we are soon out of the little crofter village, and wheeling to the left pull up before the hospitable mansion of our host, the sheep farmer who is occupant. There was still some daylight left after we had disposed of the Scotch tea which was set before us on our arrival, and ere the sun sank

low in the west, gilding the tops of the gneiss mountains, we strolled round this Viking-like mansion of the (at one time) most powerful clan in the north. The building, which is of the old Scottish style of architecture, consists of a couple of wings connected by a corridor; and its walls rise on the west side from the sea, which comes tumbling in on the reefs of yellow sand below in long rolling billows, which break and roar beneath the windows. No home could be more suitable for a Viking-like race, indeed; and no doubt Durness Bay, though not much of an anchorage, was well known to the Norsemen who rounded Cape Wrath in the olden days. The little churchyard close at hand, is interesting as the burial-place of Robert Donn Mackay, the Gaelic poet and the Burns of the Northern Highlands, above whose grave a monument has been erected, on which is an inscription in Gaelic, English, Latin, and Greek. The little mortuary chapel contains a monument to an ancient chieftain, which is not less interesting. It says:—

Here lies the body of Ronald de Voe,
Who was good to his friend but bad to his foe,
But kind to his servant in weal and woe—

a fair good character for any old Viking.

Next morning we were up betimes, resolved to have a try at the wild blue rock-pigeons on the shelves of the numerous rocky creeks and caves which are to be found along the coast, and after a refreshing swim in the pure salt water almost under our bedroom windows, and a substantial Scotch breakfast, seized our guns and made along the north side of the bay towards Farout Head, a huge rocky peninsula almost rivalling Cape Wrath, its next neighbour, which is situated about four miles to the westward. Though hard and wild, the scenery round the point is at times strikingly grand, the heavy seas rushing with a noise at times resembling thunder into the crevices, while the sea-gulls, which are to be seen in myriads, send up a screaming chorus. It was not, however, so much for scenery as for sport that we came out, and our eyes had something else to watch for than the distant loom of the Orkneys in the far horizon.

“Now mind be ready,” said my host and guide, as we stepped closely up to a bold bluff which stood from the main precipice. “This is a regular dove-cot for them, and you’ll find you will not

get so much warning as you would at a bird which is let free from a trap." We had closed to twenty-five yards distance of the face of it when, like a rocket rather than a "rock," and with a rattle of wings, something darted out, and with a regular wriggle went off down seaward. I snapped in his direction but missed, but my host more slow but more sure knocked him on to the sand below. The cracks of our guns having disturbed the remainder, they sprang out in a shower; but so smart were they that, though we singled birds as we thought, we got no more. Descending, we picked up our only victim, a hardy little fellow with darkish blue plumage, very diminutive, and as hard as a ball, quite a different bird from his brother of the woods, which is heavy but slow when on the rise, and rather soft of feather. Getting up on to the land again, we crossed to the other side, where I succeed in knocking down the first, or sentry, bird; for I am of opinion that, whether sea-birds or not, all those wild fowl which live on the edges of cliffs have a picket. The remaining three barrels of our guns went for another single, so that out of six shots we had but three birds, the breeze, which was blowing stiff and cold from the North Sea, being against us. Holding more by the village, we added a brace to our bag, but not without an expenditure of powder and shot. We then passed through the village to the famous Smoo Cave, celebrated by Sir Walter Scott, a huge cavern 100 feet wide by from 60 feet to 80 feet deep. Close by the sea, the shelves of this wonderful cave afford capital breeding-places for the blue rock, and we succeeded in getting some nice snap shots, though we unfortunately did not manage to secure our birds. With three brace and a half we bent our steps for home, thoroughly pleased with our work though our bag was small, determined to try the north side of the bay. This we did, after which we took a rest at angling, the place being literally an angler's paradise, and, after a fortnight's stay, crossed Loch Eriboll to Tongue, and found our way back by Altnaharra and Loch Naver to Lairg, thoroughly pleased with our sport in the Reay country, and our practice at the blue rock on his native crags.