

## A MIXED BAG ON THE MOORLANDS.



HERE are some men of opinion that grouse-shooting only lasts for a month, viz., from 12th August till about the middle of September, and that after that, sport on the moorlands for a season is over. Possibly the reason of this is that the grouse by that time have learned to take very good care of themselves, and are no longer the soft-feathered fluttering little poults which hang about their mother's tail while she wanders to and fro amongst the heather. Young Master Cock has by the month of October attained his majority, and every morning at daybreak, as he sits on his favourite little hill, will give his "little roc-cock-cock" of a crow with all the airs of a bird of independence. He by this time, too, has been taught the smell of gunpowder, and knows quite well that all men with dogs are not the gentle shepherds whom he used to stare at from the short heath-shoots in July. You need not try to throw salt on his tail now, nor, for the matter of that, No. 5 shot beyond fifty paces, for with the weight of a locomotive he has got the speed of a pigeon; and, though you can mark down a sore-struck partridge and find it, your grouse that crosses the first headland out of view is gone, even though he fall dead fifty yards further on. Of course, some folks will say "Why don't you drive them?" but it has to be borne in mind that all moors are not suitable for driving, and that, in fact, the birds on certain moors will *not* be driven. It is, indeed, a case of taking the horse to the water and trying to make him drink whether he is thirsty or not. This is the case with many of the best moors in the West of Scotland, and more particularly those on some of the hill-ranges of Loch Lomond and Loch Katrine where the birds, on being put up by the drivers, take sometimes a totally different direction, and so throw the sportsman stationed in the passes completely out. Still, if a man is not greedy on the bag, and does not wish to make top score and carry his bat out at the business, as many seem anxious to do nowadays, quite ignoring the fact that it is not the number you kill but the

style in which you kill them which marks a sportsman, he cannot have a better day than that which can be spent on a hill moor in Scotland in October putting together a mixed bag. That has been our experience for many years. Loch Lomond had been beginning to get a little ungenerous with us, the weather a bit boisterous, and a wee patch of white on the peak of the Ben in the morning after a storm was a sure sign of winter being at hand. The ptarmigan, of which there are still a few on the upper peaks, were beginning to show their winter plumage, the blue hare its winter fur, when the letter-bag which comes up every day by the steamer brought a welcome invitation from a laird on a neighbouring loch-side to come over and have "a blow at the grouse and what can be got." Next day, therefore, saw me *en route*, and the next again at nine o'clock after breakfast shoving a pair of Kynoch's well-crimped cartridges into the chambers of my old but still faithful and useful twelve-bore.

There was still a bit of purple in the ravines to reflect the autumn sunset as we stepped on to the heath, but the bell was rapidly disappearing, the rag weeds had lost their yellow heads, and the tangle grass was withered and drooping like the long thin grey locks on the bald heads of the aged. It was the autumn of Burns "sae pensive in yellow and grey," rather than the golden autumn of the August with its ripe fields set in the russet heath. Over the loch we could see the troubled harvesters busily engaged in setting up the stooks of grain which had been tumbled by the heavier blasts overnight, while the burns were tumbling down the hillsides, masses of beer-brown headed with a foam of churned froth. It was anything, indeed, but a grouse scene such as the purple heath school of sporting writers love to write about in their novels, with their picnics in the shade, and all that, but one of the best for sport and the making of a mixed bag a keen gunner could imagine. A walk over three miles of white land, on which we bagged a brown hare, and we reached the mountain-foot, and prepared to climb, for we meant to go down our beat S.E. to the march on the high range, and shoot home in returning by the loch-edge.

As we crossed the little wire fence a strong covey rose from the hollow in front and swept away wildly hillwards till they disappeared in the mist, thus showing us plainly at the outset that we must not expect birds to sit very close, and that we

would have to be smart in taking all those that rose within gunshot. Our dogs were a couple of Clumbers, and a pair of little rough-haired Scotch terriers, which worked close in front, and were useful in searching little grass hillocks for outlying rabbits, and ferreting out mountain-hares amongst the boulders. Ben, the keeper's big retriever, stuck close to the feet of its master, as it seemed always to do, whether at home or on the moor, and for our return beat, the keeper's lad had been sent down to a point with a brace of setters for work in some turnip-land where there were known to be several coveys of partridges which had not yet been disturbed.

It was a long, dead climb to get up to the higher slopes ; a case, indeed, of sticking your head down and your neck in the collar, and going dead hard at it like a heavily-laden draught-horse. The reward was, however, worthy of the toil, for when we looked round we could see the loch shining in the sunlight away below, with the fields and woodlands all laid out as if on a map at our feet, while away in the far distance we saw the Clyde with steamers busily plying upon its placid surface.

"And now," said my host and companion, "I'll keep on the upper side and below, and we'll see what we can do together between this and the march. Most of the birds will fly downwards, so keep just the least thing in advance of me. The mountain-hares will all run up, and I will manage to stop any of them you may happen to disturb and miss." And buttoning our coats, off we started. Scarcely had I gone a hundred yards than the little rough-haired Scotch terrier, which was working away in front of me, and seeming to be extraordinarily fond of the sport, showed that it had winded something. "A rabbit!" I thought to myself, though it is rather high up for the little conies, when on the opposite bank of a little mountain-streamlet my eye caught something white, and, in the fourth second thereafter, I rolled over, as it came into view again, a white hare. I was about to re-load, and had my finger and thumb on the lever, when there was another ominous little yelp, and a second with the terrier in pursuit crossed in front almost at my feet. I waited till he had gone up the hill a bit, and then pulled on him with the left, only, however, to see him disappear with a cloud of white fur left behind. Re-loading as I ran, I was in time to get a second

chance at him just clear of little Scottie, who was at his heels, and had the satisfaction of seeing him roll over. So far so good, I thought, one could not start to make a mixed bag on the moorlands better than with a couple of mountain-hares. The keeper came down and took charge of them, and then we crossed a large mountain-stream which was raging and roaring in full spate. This was a matter of no slight difficulty, but, with the friendly aid of the overhanging branches of a little alder-bush, we managed to swing ourselves over, and after a scramble up the bank found ourselves in front of a long undulating patch which the keeper said was full of grouse. Creeping gently up the near side of each hillock in the hope of getting a covey nestling beyond, I was about losing heart, when, *whirr!* away beneath me went a strong lot of birds. The right-barrel followed the outside bird mechanically, as if the finger said when it was on, for over he toppled headlong away down the slope. I was going to bring my gun down again when a laggard sprang from some bracken in front, and fell thirty yards off to an almost unmissable shot from my left. With the aid of Ben the second bird was lifted, though it had gone far down the slope, and the call was again onward. During all this time the gun of my fellow-sportsman had been silent, though once I had seen it raised and lowered, possibly at a white hare jinking out and in amongst the rough boulders. Far up on the edge of a precipice I saw him now stalking along with vigorous stride like a spectre in the mist, careless of the shower which now began to sweep along the mountain-side. Just as the latter was about to obscure him from my vision, I saw him throw his gun up and the two green puffs which bespoke a right and left go clear from the muzzle. The sound of the report had not reached me ere the old keeper sang out "Mark!" and down came half-a-dozen strong grouse like round shot from a 32-pounder.

"Dinna be in a hurry," says the old keeper, cautiously, "and be well forrit" (forward).

Well forward I certainly was, a good five feet ahead of the leader, I should think, and not too far, for I caught him clean, and he lowered his head, dropped his pinions, and went away dead down the slope below while I was following another with my left-barrel. With the second shot, however, I was unsuc-

cessful, as, though the feathers flew, the bird carried all the shot away without a shake. To secure the dead bird and hold on again was the work of a few minutes, and, the shower taking off soon, we had some capital sport, walking up our game and stealing round the corners and over rising grounds on the off-chance of taking coveys by surprise. When we came to the march, where we found the lad waiting with the setters, not to speak of the luncheon-hamper, we found that we had secured between us six and a half brace of grouse with nine white hares, and a brown one. Luncheon over, and a smoke, we started homeward by stalking an old blackcock which was busily feeding on the top of a corn-stook. We stuck to the old Scotch motto, "A blackcock, how or when you can," and gave him an ounce and a quarter of No. 4 shot from behind the hedge thirty-five yards off as he was busy filling his crop with oats. As the report echoed through the woodlands below a covey of black game rose from a small strip of uncut corn, and held away down into the copsewood.

"We can quite well manage to get a shot at them," was the old keeper's remark, "for I ken the verra tree on which they sit; but in the meantime we'll cross the stubble with the setters, and see if we can flush any of the partricks" (partridges).

The brown grouse of the stubble we did not find, but this was so far assuring, for if not in the stubble, we said, then they will certainly be amongst the turnips beyond. In this conjecture we proved to be right, for scarcely had we passed through the gate than the older of the setters came to a dead stop, while the other began to back. We lost no time in closing, and choosing outside birds as we stood dropped a brace each. They were marked down amongst the heather on the moorland edge, and then we continued our beat for the other coveys, from which we drew three brace and a half. Out on the heather we found them sit like stones, and picked them one by one, till we had as good a bag as you could get in a Shire turnip-field in September.

Having done with the partridges, we went off in search of the black game, and, true, enough, could detect them, as Duncan had said we would, on "the verra tree they sat," a well-grown alder standing almost isolated from its neighbours. How were we to get near them? was the question. This the keeper soon answered. "Ye'll gang right away past them *in*

their view, and gang *oot* of their view ; and then ye'll find a drain which is no very deep, and ye'll gang into that ; it will only take ye' up to the shoe heads ; and ye'll walk straight back to them till ye come to some rough bramble-bushes, and ye'll creep up behind the bushes till ye are thirty yards off, and then gie them fower barrels as quick as ye can, twa as they sit, and the other twa as they rise. I'll sit on the hill here in their view, and amuse them with the dogs. If they're watching me, they'll no think of you."

We went on as directed, sank out of view, waded back up the train to the bramble-bushes, and then crept with beating hearts close up to them. Yes, there they were all together, quite unconscious, watching Duncan and his dogs, the old man, whom we could see on the hillock, having his pipe in full reek. Getting the muzzles well to the front, and full-cocking, we both got up on our left knees, and as an old cock stretched up his neck as if to make a further survey, mine host said, "Now !" Our first barrels went simultaneously, and right in a black commotion of wings went *click! click!* the contents of our lefts. Two cocks and a grey hen tumbled down like apples shaken from a tree, and a third went off in a sickly manner as if he had had too much. We picked them up, and waited for Duncan, who somehow seemed to be in no hurry. When he did come we found, however, he had the excuse in his hand in the shape of the wounded bird, which he had seen fall. As dusk was now gathering down, we held hard on for home-wards, taking what we could get on our way, but following nothing which went wide of us, and when we counted the slain at the lodge-door found 6½ brace of grouse, five white hares, two brown hares, three grey hens, five blackcocks, and nine brace of partridges, as good a mixed bag as any man need care to make in Her Majesty's dominions.