

CHAPTER V.

BETTER LUCK.

A .400 EXPRESS RIFLE BY LANG—SUFFICIENTLY POWERFUL, AND THE LIGHTNESS AN ADVANTAGE—GOOD LUCK NEAR MOKHLUT—AN OPEN STALK—A RUNNING SHOT AND KILL—THE CALDERSHALLS AGAIN—VIEWS—A LONG STALK AND A FINE SHOT.

MOKHLUT did, however, yield a stag or two before the end of our tenancy.

I had hitherto shot with spherical bullets, but in 1882 I purchased a beautiful little double-barrelled .400 Express rifle by Lang, for my kind Morsgail neighbour had told me he had shot many deer with such a weapon. Lady M——, too, had been successful there in killing some with a very small bore. As weight was an important consideration to me, I was glad to follow in the footsteps of those whose experience had proved such light weapons to be equal to the occasion. Since then I have seen in the *Field* a similar tool recommended by another

sportsman in the Lews, who habitually used that bore for deer; and, so far as my limited experience goes, I found it sufficiently powerful. It—or, perhaps, better still, a single barrel of that bore—seems to me to be just the rifle for the Indian sportsman, so far as antelope and small fry of that nature are concerned, being exceedingly handy, and easily carried on horseback. I would not for a moment think of recommending it for big game in place of a more powerful weapon, but to those who can afford a varied battery it would be very useful as a cherished companion in one's rides and walks in a well-stocked shikar country. Many a chance have I had where such would have enabled me to get a shot, but which, weaponless, I had to let pass disregarded. It was like a mere toy, but it is a powerful one, and with straight powder is most effective. I will relate, for example, a few specimens of its powers.

Donald had brought us word that a fair stag and several hinds were lying in a little strath at the base of Mokhlut on the north, which separated it from the low-lying eminences in that direction. The ground was very open, and the position diffi-

cult of approach with the wind in the air it was that day.

We commenced our approach from about the same spot on the road whence I had commenced to stalk the eleven-pointer; but this time kept to the right. We tried hard to get within range from this direction under cover of hillocks and tummocks at the base of Mokhlut. Attaining the extreme sheltered point in that direction, we found that we could not approach even within a long range, so retraced our steps to the road, John looking glum and dissatisfied.

The approach down wind would have been the simplest thing possible, as the ground in that direction was the picture of good stalking-ground, but of course this was quite out of the question. Deer seem to delight in tantalising the eager stalker in this way, and select resting-places with fine stalking-ground to windward, which they know their keen scent renders safe as the open.

Returning to the road, we held council. John was 'feared for the wind;' he did not see how we could approach the deer without getting into it, and so giving them our scent long before we

could get near them. He would take another look. This he did from the top of a neighbouring eminence, and on his return expressed it as 'joost a chance, but the only way whatever.' We might go along up the little strath, along which flowed a burn in which sea-trout spawned (I shall refer to it again hereafter), and just take our chance of finding enough shelter by creeping up behind a mere swell in the ground on this side of the deer. As for the wind, of that, too, we must take our chance that it would not come round to our backs on our way up the strath.

To have a stag four or five hundred yards within our boundary, and not try to get at him, whatever difficulties lay in the way, was not, of course, to be thought of, so we buckled to and started once more. The way, barring being very wet, was simple travelling. We crossed and re-crossed the burn, and got along easily on the flat ground on either side. A puff or two of wind did come up suspiciously close from our right rear, but we managed to get behind the swell in the ground without viewing the deer. More stealthily we now ascended the little rise, but had barely gained the top, when the deer

winded us and made off. I do not think the stag was more than sixty yards off, but I took a snap shot and missed him.

They disappeared from view for a very brief period, and then we sighted them galloping along the other side of the little strath. Instead of getting directly into the wind, they had circled round, and were now full on their way to the Grimersta ground. I had time to pop another cartridge into my empty barrel and get put down on the ground. I took the stag as he galloped along broadside on, and felt that I was behind as I fired. Swinging on with him, I got well forward, and dropped him with my left dead in his tracks—a stag with seven points. We measured the distance, which was a hundred and thirty yards. This was a good example of swing in shooting. My right barrel had touched him in the hind leg, but not in any way seriously to injure or impede him. The second barrel was a little far back, but practically deadly. With a single barrel I should have been unsuccessful. The corollary to this is, use a double barrel.

We were not long in reaching the road, and, just where we deposited the stag, up got a snipe.

I had my gun and pointer with me, intending to kill a few grouse on my way back, should I not get deer, or get them quickly, as I had done, near the cross roads ; so, as we marked down this snipe, I went up and killed it and missed another, and on my way home wound up by killing five brace of grouse, which I found almost all singly. I thought it rather a good day, on the whole.

The successful shot at this stag redeemed the first miss. I often found that I did better at longish range than when close. What with the hurry and flurry of getting on deer when we made a particularly successful stalk within sixty or seventy yards, and their greater quickness in detecting us and making off, obliging me to be also hurried, I did better when not so close. Besides this, the men had not time to place me on the ground, and the slightest movement on their part, when holding me up, of course upsets so fine an aim as the rifle requires, though not generally material with the shot-gun, where all is in movement.

I fear the reader will be more wearied of reading about so many stalks, with no great event or dramatic incident attached to them, than I in

relating them. I would, however, trespass on his patience in describing one more, for I think on that occasion, I made the finest shot I ever made in my life, though I have killed a tiger and bear each dead with a single ball, when young and active, now alas! more than two decades ago. I do not mean to set up as a first-rate rifle-shot either in the present or the past. I never was that. At times only I did fairly well, and in the course of some considerable experience, like most others, made occasionally good and successful shots, a little out of the common, as was the one I propose now to relate.

The scene is again the Caldershalls, and my progress for the first half-mile almost identical with that described in the stalk of the ten-pointer, except that I kept lower down and nearer to the burn which there formed the boundary between Morsgail and Grimersta. That exacting influence the wind was the cause of this, as it was more from the south. But still I was pretty high up, and had a fine view over the country and on to our own ground.

From the height we had attained, to our right, we could see a portion of Loch Langabhat, 'the

pure bosom of the nursing lake,' from which issues the Grimersta river, the best salmon river in the Lews, and bad to beat anywhere. A long, low stretch of dark moorland lay on this side, said to be good for grouse. Beyond rose in swelling amplitude Ben More, and other hills in Park, an eastern district of the island.* The conical hill of Roineval appeared near the foot of the long lake, where the Grimersta debouches; a view of the latter was intercepted by the nearer hills of Coolin, on the slopes of which we could even now discern several deer, and between them and Mokhlut, bits of our fishing loch—the loch of the 'old bald-headed man.' Bringing the eye round still farther to the left, the Stornoway road appeared where it passed round the base of the rugged eminence I have so often referred to as Mokhlut, beyond which rose Taival and other hills on our ground. Winding among braes, here coming straight towards us, there disappearing, the road could be traced till it passed the cross road which led to Scaliscro Lodge, and descended to and crossed the burn above which we now rested. Between ourselves and outer Loch Roag, and

* The scene of the recent raid.

intercepting all view of it, was a confused jumble of the comparatively small hills and rocky knolls and braes which formed, for the most part, the principal feature of the Scaliscro ground.

It was a fair, but wild and desolate scene, with no sign of human habitation save one or two deserted sheilings, crowning little green knolls, small oases in the moorland waste. But the colouring was glorious. Even now, at this late season of the year, the tawny brown orange tint of the bent, so plentifully distributed among the heather and peaty bogs, contrasted exquisitely with the numerous tarns and lochlets which glistened as they caught every reflected tint of the sky; the darker masses of moorland seemed additionally dark as the water shone forth in blue.

It was a wildish day, but gleams broke through the hurrying clouds, as their shadows raced over the landscape, and lit up at intervals loch and crag and moor, imparting to each the glory of light; and rendering that in shadow all the more mysterious.

But we had not come out to dwell on this scene, however beautiful, and it behoved us to get on, if we would invade the haunts of the deer on this day, which got wilder and darker as it

wore on. We were trudging along, when Ian caught sight of a stag, which, however, did not see us, and we quickly got into a more sheltered position.

The stag was alone, and on the move, evidently very unsettled. However, he was soon joined by several hinds, and they all disappeared among the knolls of the high ridge connecting the two Caldershalls, very much in the direction of the spot where I fired my last shot and killed the ten-pointer the year before.

I got into a nice snug place, and lit my pipe while John and Donald, as usual, went off to find out what place the deer would select for their rest or feed.

Donald soon reappeared to take his place in the team, saying that John was watching the deer which were feeding among the braes near the scene of my last shot, as above referred to. We were soon within sight of John, who was stretched at length on the top of a hillock among some rocks, and watching the deer. He motioned us to remain where we were, but presently joined us, as usual on such occasions, grave and serious.

‘He’s a gude stag, sir,’ he said. ‘I can make

out five points on one antler; but I'm thinking there'll no be so many on the other. The points are small.'

I had visions of a royal, and had hoped to improve on my head of last year, so I asked him if there was no chance of finding anything better, for I longed to try my little '400 Express on 'foemen worthy of his steel.'

'There's no another stag this side Caldershall Mohr, anyways, whatever may be beyant,' he replied.

As the 'beyant' was something more than I could manage, I was fain to put up with what was provided on this side, so accordingly we prepared to tackle our friend with the five on one antler and doubtful on the other.

John and I both looked lovingly at the little weapon as I uncased it from its snug cover, and, after looking it over, handed it to him to carry till we neared the deer. He had acquired a certain respect for it which I was inclined to think he did not at first entertain for such a toy-looking little tool. But he had learned what its powers really were. He handled it tenderly as he took it in charge and led the way.

We had to work round a good bit under shelter of the braes, and then turned, ascending right into them. We soon came to a longish flat ridge, and John told us we should come in view of the deer in the little corrie at the farther end. Carrying me partly sideways, so that I might be prepared for any sudden emergency, we got along.

‘I’m seeing them,’ muttered Ian, who was most in front; but we had to advance a step or two further before I could do so. There they were, perhaps a dozen of them, some feeding, some lying down, not a hundred yards off, but—all hinds.

They ran together, as some unusual movement on the hill-top attracted their attention, and just then up started the stag, who had been lying hidden a little beyond them, and my eye at once fell on him. The men had not time to put me down, so, muttering ‘Steady!’ to them, I took rapid aim and fired. The stag ran towards the hinds, and all galloped away over the brae beyond; but as they did so we saw that the stag was going lame.

Directly they disappeared, John flew off in their wake, pulling out his telescope as he ran, and he soon topped the brae, but at a lower elevation



A RUNNING SHOT.

than the deer had done. He disappeared, and came again in sight, ascending another brae, and then we discerned him crawling forward till he reached the top, and remained motionless. We discussed the situation without daring to move, or any further expose ourselves, and came to the conclusion that the stag was going slowly, and was waiting to lie down, which John was watching for.

In effect, this was about what was happening, as John informed us when he some time after joined us. Well-pleased were we to see him withdraw himself with a retrograde, crab-like movement from the brae-top, till he was able to stand erect in its shelter and come towards us.

‘The stag is hit,’ he said, ‘but they deils o’ hinds kept moving on when he wanted to lie down, and kept the puir beastie moving. But they’re gone off at last, and he has turned into a bit corrie right awa’ below Caldershall Mohr. I’m thinking ye’ll no get at him, captain.’

There was a solemn pause. The excitable Highland nature is as easily depressed as excited, and mournful looks met mine.

‘Is he badly hit?’ I asked.

'Weel, I'm no vera sure, captain,' replied John. 'He's lame in the shoulder whatever, and wanted to stop, moreover, but for the hinds. But in my opinion he will no be very bad.'

'Well, anyhow, he's hit, so we must do what we can to bag him,' I said; and in this John cordially concurred, though the ground would only give me a very long shot, even if I got anywhere near at all.

With active exertion all depression vanished, and we took much the same course as we had done in our first stalk of the ten-pointer.

The day had got wilder, and some sharp rain-storms met us as we plodded our way among the braes, and, turning, faced the lower slopes of Caldershall. It was a good piece to travel, but we made the best of our way.

As I have described the character of the route before, I shall simply say that we attained the shelter of a rounded spur on the slopes of Caldershall without being detected, and that John, spying our way in front, said we could get no nearer. The stag was in a corrie, on the other side of another ridge, between two and three hundred yards away, and by no possible means

could I be got closer. A man could have squirmed himself along to the next ridge, perhaps, but not any larger body of men and material without being fully exposed.

So I was placed on the ground with my eyes just looking over the ridge. The evening was drawing in, and was dark and stormy—great advantages to us in stalking, but, in taking advantage of the stalk and aiming, not so favourable. The stag was standing half-turned from us on the farther side of a gully, and was more than two hundred yards off. He looked very dim and ghostlike against the hill. He was aware, I think, of our neighbourhood, or, at any rate, suspected something, and seemed to be listening. He certainly had not the wind of us. I aimed and fired. He started off at once, not skirting the hill, as one would have expected from a wounded stag, but faced the steep acclivity above him, and got along at a fair pace. He had not ascended far when he exposed his broadside fully to me, and I took the opportunity of letting him have my left and pet barrel, not certainly expecting much result. Down, however, he came, rolling down the hill without a kick, till brought

up by being lodged in the bottom of a small hollow.

'I never saw the like o' that!' exclaimed Ian, quite astonished at the distance. 'Deed but yon's a grand shot.'

John tore off like a demon when he saw that the deer was motionless, tugging away at his knife as his short and sturdy legs made, not exactly fairy-like progress, but still got over the ground sufficiently fast. Donald also held his winged course in the direction of the stag, and they were both soon at work galloching and cutting off the head.

The place was rather too steep for us. At any rate, it was hardly worth while struggling up to the dead stag, so we waited till John returned with the head, bloody and pleased.

'Stone dead,' he exclaimed, triumphantly; 'shot right through the heart. 'Deed, but it's a bonnie bit rifle, captain.'

Further inquiries elicited the facts that the first shot of all had struck him on the point of the shoulder, but must have been somewhat superficial, and not sufficient, John thought, to prove mortal. Indeed, the stag's activity, just ex-

hibited, proved that such was not likely. My right-barrel, just fired, had missed, and the left, as John intimated, was plum centre. We all agreed that the distance could not be less than two hundred and fifty yards, and taking all the circumstances into consideration, and that the stag was moving at the time, I put it down as the best shot I ever made, and I think so still.

The place where I killed this stag was not far from the spot where I got my first shot at the ten-pointer, and the final shot at the latter was close in the neighbourhood of my first shot on this occasion.

This stag had very small points, but he carried five on one branch, such as they were, but only three on the other. Compared with good mainland stags, these island heads are, however, miserably small. We had a longer trudge back than on the former occasion, but managed it in the dusk without accident.

I killed two or three other stags and several hinds while at Scaliscro, but, in consideration of my promise to my possible readers, I refrain from any further detailed description, and I daresay they will thank me for my reticence.

My brother usually left us before the time when they came on to our ground, except on a very few occasions, when we made joint stalks with more or less success, and so it happened that the best stags I got was when alone. But, after all, these trophies are but miserable things compared with the antlers of the noble barasingha of Cashmere which adorn his hall, for on its beautiful mountains and in its glorious woods he has been a successful shikaree.