

FAREWELL TO THE SHOOTING SEASON.



WHEN the mild weather forces the snowdrops and the crocuses above the ground, the sportsman's year may be considered over, so far as shooting is concerned. No doubt February frosts and snows may bring a few woodcock, but, with only ground game free, pheasants being fenced round by the Close Time Act, no one cares much for covert shooting. Wild duck and teal may still be had, of course, in certain countries, and the rabbit will always afford an afternoon's sport, though if the ferrets have been much through the holes in the early part of the season he will be slow to bolt. Guns, therefore, will this month in most cases be laid past, and the season declared over, except where special kinds of shooting may be had, such as in the West Highlands, where many a good old seal is stalked in the spring months. It is not without a pang, however, that a sportsman lays aside his fowling-piece for the year, for, though angling may be one of the most enjoyable of pastimes, it does not afford that amount of exercise which one gets from tramping over moss and fell.

It was while thinking over my plans for the interregnum that the postman brought a letter, the address on the envelope of which raised warm hopes. The pith lay in the postscript, which was—

“Bring your gun. It is far on in the season, but there is enough on the ground to fill a bag, and we have lots of snipe.”

The welcome invitation was from a keen sportsman, a country laird in the North, as famous for his hospitality as for his success with his live stock in the cattle show yard. He was one of that good old landlord school of lairds, the last representatives of which were possibly—and what coursing men will forget them?—Graham of Limekilns, Sharpe of Hoddum, and Hyslop of Tour. Southern manners are fast rubbing them out, however, just as southern mail trains have shunted the old stage coaches off the roads. Preparing some cartridges for mixed shooting, I overhauled my gun, seeing that the locks, extractors, and

rebounding plungers worked freely, my old red setter surveying, from its comfortable resting-place on the hearth-rug under the glow of the blazing fire, the whole with apparent indifference, having long ago become accustomed to watching my getting ready for sporting expeditions, I retired to dream of snap shots at ducks, "rights and lefts at snipe, and warm corners by the covert side." Next morning I was up long before the lark, and was busy at breakfast, when the "crunching" sound of wheels on the gravel outside told me that my man was ready with the trap, so seizing my gun, which was standing by the mantelpiece in its waterproof cover, and my empty game-bag, I pitched Sancho into the box underneath the seat, and jumped up beside my driver.

"Hard frost, Sandy, I see," was my remark, as he sent the old mare spinning down the approach.

"Verra hard, sir!" was his reply, "but a rare day for the gun, as the ground's dry, and there'll be good walking across the plough; the hares will all be on the plough, I should think, the day, sir; the wild weather's been keeping them in the cover, and hares don't like woodlands if they can make themselves comfortable in the open."

The morning indeed was a lovely one. The sun shining out strong and brilliant, and causing the frosted ground to gleam as if strewn with pearls. The air was clear, too, and bracing, and altogether the weather was of that kind which makes a sportsman fret at home, and long to be in the fields fondling his fowling-piece. In the Autumn one can experience no such feeling, as, though August mornings are cool, the atmosphere generally becomes oppressive if there be not a breeze blowing, while the rank vegetation buzzing with insect-life makes shooting appear unnatural, and it certainly is not half so enjoyable as in winter, when the brackens have all been frosted down, the foliage swept from the trees and hedges, and rabbits and hares are full-grown and healthy and hardy from having to work harder on the scant pastures for a living. However, each man to his taste, and if men prefer the noise, smoke, and slaughter of battues to five brace made by hard walking and good shooting, let them do so. They must not, however, be allowed to call it sport.

After a drive of ten miles, which was done in something less

than an hour, the little mare being very smart, and the road a well-kept one, free from loose "macadam," we found ourselves at the entrance to Lawfield, the old Laird being at the lodge-gate ready for my reception, coat off and hedge-knife in hand, busy hedge-pruning, this being his favourite occupation, and one at which he was an adept, his boundary hedges being quite a treat to look at as viewed from the roadside. After the usual compliments had been passed, I entered the house, and whipped off the "wee drap" which is generally offered to every man after a drive, no matter how early the hour, if the weather be cold, and then together we walked down to the little lodge where lived his gardener and gamekeeper, who filled a somewhat similar post to that which Sandy held with me. We found the two worthies discussing the probabilities of our finding game, and arranging the beat, which was to be "round the mairches on the Duke's side." We held on over the thinly-clad lea-fields, with Sancho, our only dog, at my heels—for setters or pointers are of little use hare-finding, indeed they are of little use at all for winter shooting—until we came to the ploughed land, a field of oat-stubble which had just been turned over.

"Rather cold, is it not, Sandy?" said the Laird.

"May be, sir, but it's drier, and not so cold as the Duke's moss the day. Ye see, Laird, the furrow drains the watter away from their form. Now, on the lea-land their forms fill up till they're soaking with watter. Of course there's hard frost the day, but before this frost set in they had left the wet moss, and they had their forms all ready made before the frost came on keen, for this frost didn't set in till the morning."

We searched five or six acres of the red plough very carefully, and were just beginning to despair, when there was a shout from my henchman, and, looking round, we observed him with both hands in the air as a sign for caution.

"Here she is, gentlemen. I was sure we would find her; just be ready now, and keep a lookout, for she'll have a neighbour not far off."

Approaching, we could see a little mound of rough earth heaved up above one of the little plough-ridges of the furrow, but no hare.

"She's there, gentlemen, as snug as she'll be in the bag on my back, if ye can handle a gun at all, in half a minute."

The Laird having motioned me forward to do the work, not of much difficulty, certainly, I stepped up, and sure enough saw, as I had seen many a time, puss literally sewed down into her form. I could see her move as I approached, no doubt disengaging herself, and, knowing all the time that her eyes were upon me, I walked as if to pass her. She lay still, but the moment I glanced at her big brown eyes, she was up, off, and over, as I just let her run thirty yards, and then up with my gun, and let her have the shot behind the ears, so that she turned a somersault and lay dead. We searched the remainder of the field for the neighbour, but without any avail. On passing through a gate, however, to a park which had been laid down in permanent pasture, there was another shout from Sandy, who said it was a matter of certainty that her neighbour was in that rough piece of ground in the corner. The Laird complied with his request to have a walk through it, and sure enough up jumped puss from her form amongst the withering thistles to roll over to the right-barrel of the old gentleman's muzzle-loading Joe Manton. Thanks to Sandy, whose eyes were evidently specially formed for finding hares, we got three more before we arrived at the marshes, which were said to be full of snipe. Sure enough we found them pretty numerous, and the old Laird managed to knock down a brace out of the first "wisp" of them we came across. It was very warm work for a time, and we bagged some fourteen before we left them for larger game, greatly to the delight of Sandy, who could not see any fun in killing what he called "sic trash." He liked to see something killed which would fill a pot. In a belting near the house we found four pheasant-cocks and three woodcock, and knocked down a brace of partridges from a covey which had somehow escaped during the whole summer, having been on the Lawfield side when the Duke's party came our way, and the Duke's side when we came round. These, with about a dozen of rabbits, seven hares, a teal, duck, and three golden plover, made up a well-mixed bag in as good a day's winter shooting as it has ever been my privilege to enjoy.