

## A DAY'S PHEASANT SHOOTING.

**T**HOUGH hunting men will always contend that pheasants and foxes can be preserved together, gamekeepers are prepared to swear to the contrary, and "velveteens" has generally the best in the end of all such arguments. No doubt Reynard prefers the cleaner morsel, viz., the bit out of a rabbit, his favourite piece being the loins; but when rabbits get scarce, or what amounts to very much the same thing, cunning and wary, he will take what he can get, be it wild duck, pheasant, or barn-door fowl. It is not in winter, however, that he is sweet on furred game, but rather in summer, when he will lift the hen pheasant off her eggs, leaving the latter, unless timeously lifted and put down again at the keeper's residence to be hatched, to rot and get useless. Nor is the old cock very safe, for when strutting through the growing crop of oats or beans alongside the cover, he will give out, in ignorant conceit, his triumphant crow, and find himself seized by the neck by "the varmint," which has, of course, been attracted to the spot. The young brood suffer heavily, foxes making their haunts by stubble or cover side, and feeding on them when they get a chance. As a rule, however, pheasants will not suffer so much where rabbits are plentiful as where rabbits are scarce; but as a heavy stock of the latter would not be allowed in these modern days of Game-law legislation, the keeper has no remedy. He must, therefore, hatch a heavy stock of pheasants at home, and after hand rearing, scatter them about in his woods. This system is now the cause of the much-despised style of battue shooting, which is as unlike the pheasant shooting of old as partridge driving is unlike partridge shooting in the pre-percussion days, and before Joe Manton's name became a household word amongst sportsmen. Every day we read of tremendous "bags" ("sacks" ought to be the word now) of game being killed by the parties assembled at the country houses of noblemen and gentlemen in the shires; but when one reflects on the

fact that the dead birds have been domesticated by hand, and reared, if not actually hatched by incubators—he is apt to ask where the sport comes in. In the good old times it was different; and though there were hot corners as now, where what are now designated “bouquets” of shots were common, they were with real wild-hatched birds, strong of wing and quick and straight in flight, and, as sportsmen found, hard to hit and difficult to bring down. Good old rocketers, however, are now as rare as pheasants promise to be altogether in a few years, for the farmer seems to have got his eye upon them. If they are not allowed to be sold as game no doubt they will pass for good spring chickens; but that, however, is a matter foreign altogether to sport, and it is of some genuine good sport—pheasant shooting—I pruned my quill to write about.

Grouse had, as usual, gone out on the 10th of December, about this time eleven years ago, and moorland shooting had, of course, closed, save for white hares, and I daresay I might add black-cocks, for somehow, as you are allowed to take a black-cock how you can, you seem to be allowed, notwithstanding the Close Time Act, to take him whenever you have a chance. On the finishing day, my shooting partner and myself, who had leased a nice long stretch of heather on a lowland moor, wound up our season by bagging eleven brace and half-a-dozen hares, our total, notwithstanding keen and careful shooting, and an unlimited expenditure of shoe leather, being fully fifty brace behind what we were told the moor was good for. We had no marketing arrangement, as some partners have, but we were rather disappointed all the same, and gave vent to our feelings rather strongly to the factor, who lost no time in communicating our expressions of dissatisfaction to the laird. Fortunately for us the latter was wooing the county for Parliament at the time, and was of course anxious to keep on good terms with as many as possible. I was therefore not in the slightest surprised when a nattily dressed groom drove up to the door in a neat Whitechapel cart one day, and touching his hat, handed me a note. It was from his master, and was to inform me that, together with my friend, we were granted liberty to shoot his covers at C——, as he found that he would not be able to do so himself, as he intended leaving shortly for the south of France for the winter. The note concluded with the natural request

that we should be good enough to inform his keeper the day on which we might be expected. After having communicated with the leaseholder, we made all our arrangements for enjoying to the full the great privilege which had been granted us, for the C—— preserves were famous as being the best stocked in a very strong game-preserving county where Reynard was occasionally pulled down with a couple of ounces of shot, the cry of "Tally ho" having been unheard in the neighbourhood for years, the country having long ceased to be hunted. After an early frost had lifted to a gentle, genial thaw, a note was slipped down to the head-keeper, Malcolmson, to inform him that he might expect us the second morning afterwards with the breaking of the daylight, for we meant to have as much sport as we could 'twixt sunrise and sunset. Six o'clock in the morning saw us breakfasting together in front of a blazing fire at the house of my friend, who was a confirmed bachelor, while a brace of Clumbers shared the hearth-rug with my old Gordon setter, who was a sort of "dog of all work," good on heather or on stubble, first-rate in cover, and with a tender mouth, very fond of doing a little retrieving when required.

"We're going to have a glorious day," said my friend, after tapping the glass, and looking out of the window from beneath the blinds. "The sun is going to break, without too much colour in a grey sky, and the glass has risen three-tenths since last night, and promises to go steadily up."

"Just the sort of weather, too, I like," I said, helping myself to some crisp oat cakes and some genuine country bacon. "Frost is not good weather for pheasant shooting at the best, but it would not suit the C—— covers at all, as the birds would run on ahead from the ringing noise, and clear off to the other side of the river at the gullies."

"The ground's nice and soft to-day," continued my host "and without wet; the cover will not be uncomfortable. 'Gad,' we're in luck altogether! and I feel like shooting, too; my eyes are as cool and as clear as icicles, and my fingers are itching every five minutes to clutch my gun."

As he spoke he rose and walked over to the mantelpiece, against which leaned my favourite old "twelve," the barrels, bright and polished, reflecting the glow from the blazing coals. Picking it up, he flung it to his shoulder, but with the remark

"too much crook in the stock for me," he crossed the room and seized his own, the dogs following at his heels as keenly as if he was in cover. Handling it affectionately he laid it down, with the remark, "Hang me, old lass, if birds are missed to-day don't blame me, for I'm as fit as a fiddle," and came back to the breakfast-table. More oat cakes were swallowed, more bacon, some smashed game, the flavour of which showed the 10th of December to be not far gone, and with a farewell cup of tea we were ready, just as his man, who had carried his bag on the moors for years, brought the trap round to the door. Shoving our guns into their cloth covers, and seizing each our game-bags, which contained all our cartridges, a good-sized whisky-flask, and a pair of dry socks, we bade the old housekeeper good-bye, my host telling her to be "on the hark for the gig-wheels" about seven in the evening. Taking our seats, we were soon whirling along the road behind the fast trotting pony, our coats buttoned up to our necks, for the morning had a little left of the recent frosty chill in it. Steadily the sun rose and dispelled the darkness, and as we turned into the main approach to C— Hall it was broad day, clear and grey, and with a look about it of lasting. Late-feeding rabbits limped about in all directions, while here and there a pheasant ran across the road and disappeared amongst the rhododendrons. With a sweep to the left, and then a sharp turn to the right, then down a slight hill, we found ourselves brought immediately in front of the keeper's house, where Malcolmson, who was one of the best of his craft in that part of the country side, was waiting for us, together with two of his men.

"Good morning, gentlemen," was his salute as he touched his Balmoral bonnet, "I am glad to see you've brought good weather with you."

"Good morning, Malcolmson," shouted out my host, "I hope your pheasants are all in good order, and fair condition?"

"Well, sir, they might have been worse if it had not been for some of us last night."

"What d'ye mean?"

"Oh, just some of your old friends!" was the quiet remark, accompanied by a cunning smile, for my friend was the procurator-fiscal or public prosecutor for that district of the county, "but we were too many for them."



"Shaking his fist  
at a couple of notorious poachers"

W. S. W. 1851

"Got any of them?" was the sharp interrogation.

"Just go in there and see," was the reply.

The Fiscal rushed through the door of a little stable, and then we heard him burst out into a foaming lecture to some persons unknown. Following, we found him shaking his fist at a couple of notorious poachers, who stood tied to the manger scowling like demons. The thought of how his promised day's sport had been nearly spoiled seemed to have fairly aroused my sporting partner, and, to the great amusement of the old keeper, he kept repeating to them that it would be "five years this time, and not one day less, no, not one." The men had had but little sleep, but still they declared that they did not feel in the least tired, and, as the policeman who had been sent for made his appearance in a few minutes to relieve them of the charge of their troublesome customers, they vowed themselves, after a drop of good Glenlivet, ready to start at once.

With three rabbit-catchers, each carrying stout ash plants, and with Sandy, the coachman, to assist in beating, we were ready for the day's work, and to seek out more successfully than the poachers, it was to be hoped, the desired pheasants. Woodcock we were told to look out for, as several had been flushed by the rabbit-catchers when visiting their traps, and as there were half-a-dozen roe deer said to be shifting about from haunt to haunt of the long stretch of woods which fringed the river Con for a few miles, we had good promise of large game also. The beaters having lighted their pipes, jumped into cover at a place where Malcolmson had agreed they should commence work. We filled the chambers of our guns with cartridges, and were ready for anything, my companion taking the bottom side, and leaving me to manage the upper. Rattling their sticks the beaters soon raised a noise, while, to mark their own whereabouts, the calls went continually, "Shoo cock, cock! hey cock! hoo cock! herry cock-cock!" in merry fashion.

"Mark!" on the right came the cry from below, and the sound of wings broke on my ear. Clearing the tree tops grand pheasant cock came sailing into view, and, just as he steadied his flight with one of those peculiar waverings of his wings, I shook him up with the contents of the right barrel, and down he came with a crash amongst the hazel bushes a few yards further on. My old setter had been "roading" a rabbit

just below me, but gave it up, and crossing the ride made to pick it up, but the keeper's big retriever was before her, and, disappearing, came back with it in his mouth, still fluttering. Almost at the same moment the rabbit dashed into view, but being in the act of doubling back my gun after reloading, I was too late for a snap at it.

"Shoo cock!" cried out the old keeper, as a signal to the other beaters; and the response was taken up with the calls of "Hey cock, cock, cock!" and the beating of sticks against the trunks of the ash trees all along the whole line.

"Mark! cock," came the sharp call, followed by woodcock on the left. There was a moment's silence, and then my friend's gun rang out the echoes of its report, sounding away ahead through the windings of the wooded glen.

"Ready, my boys! All right!" came the answer back to the query, "Have you got him?" And on we moved again.

"There are pheasants running on in front of us," said Malcolmson, "but you need not go forward yet."

Scarcely had he spoken when, put up by the old setter, a woodcock went flip-flap up the ride, to get my shot just as he closed on the edge of the trees. "I just thought so; in fact, I was just going to tell you that I never saw this place fail to hold a woodcock any winter that they were in," said the keeper. Picking up Master Longbill, he placed him in the net of his bag, and then advised me to hurry forward till I came to a small gully or opening which ran down to the river, there to wait for the pheasants, which he said must be running on ahead of the beaters, but which would be sure to halt for a bit amongst some thick scrub and artificial cover which had been made from the faggots or prunings of the foresters. The Fiscal was warned to move forward also, and we were soon able to hail each other from our stations. Betwixt tree-top and tree-top on each side we had a clear forty yards, which was ample to allow us a single bird going quick, but little enough for a right and left, or the use of the second barrel on a fast-going rocketeer. "Shoo, cock, cock!" went the call of the beaters again, as they rattled their ash sticks on every tree trunk that would ring, and then came the call, "Mark! cock" and another woodcock came along silently, to find himself the victim of a leaden shower from my friend's gun, as he zig-zagged down the ride. Scarcely had

its echoes rang out, than whirr came the noise of many wings, and down came half-a-dozen pheasants. Singling out a cock which was heading the lot, I turned him tail upward, and was able to shift to another of his sex, the warning words of the head-keeper, "Ware hens!" ringing in my ears. As the beaters closed they came away in strong flights, and it was a case of load and fire as rapidly as we could, both at the top and bottom of the pass. When the men emerged from the thick undergrowth at the edge we had done good work, and ten cock pheasants, three woodcocks, and a number of odd rabbits were picked up, little powder having been wasted.

Crossing the gully the beaters held on down the river side, and with an occasional woodcock now and then, a brown hare, and a rabbit every hundred yards, we made the woodlands ring merrily to the cracks of our guns. Another pass or gully was in time reached, and here, as before, we had more warm work, making some splendid shots at rocketers, which, sailing high over head at great speed, caused us to swing on their line of flight as far as one would require to do on a December driven grouse with half a gale of wind at his back. We were warmly at work, when the stirring shouts came, "Mark! roe-deer on the right," followed from near the bottom by, "Mark! roe-deer on the left." Two winged chances were allowed to pass unheeded, and wisely so, for just at the minute out popped from the thicket, between twenty and thirty yards above me, a nice little roe. Giving her the right behind the fore leg, and following it up with the left in the same spot, she rolled over just as Malcolmson, who had been coming up, rushed out opening his knife, and as the gun of the Fiscal rang out below. Looking round I saw we had both of them, so that we had made certain of our Christmas venison.

The sun by this time had crossed the meridian, and having had a good time of it we counted the slain by the river-side below, got out the luncheon hamper, and enjoyed ourselves in a manner that only a successful shooting party can understand. With few hours more of daylight, and plenty of game, we took it easy, hunting the outlying hedgerows with mossy banks for woodcock, beating the "buttons" or little bits of outlying woods in the fields, and traversing some odd patches of rushes for an occasional jack snipe. When the sun began to sink we had



little ammunition left, and not much powder in ourselves ; and, tired and weary, and the big flasks emptied, it was not to be wondered that Sandy, the coachman, had to shake us up in our seats in the dog-cart when we arrived at the door of the Fiscal in the evening.

