

CHAPTER II.

DEER-SHOOTING.

STALKING ON THE CALDERSHALL HILLS—THREE JOHNS—OUR KEEPER JOHN—IAN—JOHN MACKENZIE—ALL UNMISTAKABLY CELTIC—CRAGGY KNOLLS AND SMALL CORRIES—A FINE VIEW—A GOOD STAG—NO TIME TO BE LOST—‘THE DEER ARE THERE, CAPTAIN!’—‘A TEN-POINTER!’—I TOOK HIM AS HE STOOD—‘SHE’S GOT THE BULLET!’—A SNAP SHOT—THE MARCH BACK—‘A GUDE STAG!’

It was on a roughish day towards the end of the season of 1881 that I availed myself of the permission given by my kind neighbour at Morsgail to try to get a good stag on and about the Caldershall hills.

On our own ground we had only succeeded in killing a few unimportant deer without having secured one really good head. My brother had already left, and I had only waited with the above object in view. The island stags are small, and their antlers have none of the wide-sweeping proportions of those in the mainland forests, but still a head of ten tynes makes no despicable orna-

ment for the hall even when thus limited in spread and size of branch.

With eager hope, therefore, I drove off to the foot of Caldershall Beg, for the one road of that part of the country wound round its base and formed our boundary. At about one-and-three-quarter miles our lodge-road or track—for it was not much better—joined the main road, and less than half-a-mile farther on my men were waiting for me. At this point Morsgail marched with Grimersta on the east side of the road, and a burn formed the dividing boundary. The deer came nightly on to our ground between the road and loch, for there was some good grazing there; but, unless a north-east wind drew them into the hills farther back, they seldom remained, but returned to Morsgail. A biting north-easter with hard weather was best for our ground. On this occasion it was exactly in the opposite direction, which was all right for the hills I was about to travel.

My team soon had me out of the cart, and strapped and buckled all right on to the carrying apparatus; and this is a good opportunity for me to introduce John, the keeper, and the different

individual gillies composing my team, on whose stamina and effort my sport so much depended.

John, now keeper on Scaliscro, had formerly been watcher on the Blackwater river at Garrynahine, when Sir James Matheson retained that fishing in his own hands. Several years before, I had first made his acquaintance there, when he guided me to the capture and death of many salmon. He was short and sturdy, very keen after deer, and, knowing every hillock and stone about, was excellent in leading me by suitable ways to compass our stalks. A bit of a scholar, too, was John; fond of reading, and passages from some of his graphic letters will probably hereafter appear in this little volume. He was married, and had a tribe of children.

There were three Johns altogether with me. I shall refer to the keeper as John; to John Ferguson, my leading gillie, as Ian; and John Mackenzie, one of the side-men behind, I shall call by his double name.

Ian had an important position in the shafts in front, for on his steadiness and lead depended my getting into a good position for a shot, and,

that obtained, on remaining quite calm and steady when I delivered my shot; my range being confined on the left-front to an angle of some 45°. If birds were sprung on the right, of course I could not take them. Shot rattled past his ear tolerably close sometimes, and at first he winced a little, but soon became inured to this, and confident as to my carefulness. He had acted in this capacity when I first visited the Lews several years before, and, being strong, was very serviceable and careful. His brother Donald, the other side-man behind, was a fine, good-looking fellow, with a very keen eye for deer, and lifted his cap, when courtesy so required, with all the grace of the old *régime*, as contradistinguished to the quick jerk and sweep which is the custom now-a-days in more fashionable circles.

John Mackenzie—an elder of the church, I believe—was the cheeriest, most laughing elder it has been my fortune to come across. A sturdy, good-looking fellow was John Mackenzie when he first carried me—for he too formed one of my original team—but now, like his master, somewhat grey about the gills. According to

his own account, he 'had not got much Eenglish,' but he had more than he owned to.

Last, within the shafts behind, came Kenneth Smith. Silent and reserved, Kenny was thoroughly reliable, and his opinions were, I think, listened to by the others with consideration. A tall, lean, strong man, he did me excellent service. They were all devoted to my wife, but I think Kenny was, perhaps, the most assiduous in brushing off any specks of dirt from her jacket, and in other little feminine attentions of that nature. He had no English to speak of. His vocabulary being confined to such curt expression as stag, shnipe, 'ole cock,' &c. They were all good and kindly fellows, and we learned to regard them with a genuine and most friendly interest, which, I think, was reciprocated. All were unmistakably Celtic, except, perhaps, John Mackenzie, who may have had something of the Norse about him.

John was somewhat radiant, but grave and solemn, as became the serious business in which we were about to engage.

'I'm thinking the captain will be getting a shot the day, whatever,' he remarked, as I prepared to wrestle with my wraps before making

the ascent of the hill in face of the cold wind which swept round it in strong blasts.

‘Hope so, John,’ I said. ‘Where do you expect the deer?’

‘Donald here, he was hearing two stags roaring the morn, but it’s in my mind that they are owre the march into Grimersta, but in this wind I expect there will be deer in shelter of Caldershall Mohr.’

So replied John, as we got into harness, and prepared to verify or not his expectations.

Alas! the stags had already begun to roar, and the venison was likely to be a little too *tasty* to suit the southern palate. But it would not be lost on that account. Salted down, it affords good meat, possibly wholesome, certainly strong flavoured, for the winter consumption of the Lews man to eke out his humbler fare of meal and potatoes. A Highlander likes his animal food full-flavoured, and certainly stag out of season must meet his requirements in that respect, and be preferable to braxy mutton.

Partly ascending, yet at the same time skirting round Caldershall Beg, we made our way towards the high broken ridge which connects the two

Caldershalls at their north-eastern ends. The craggy knolls and small corries about this ridge were favourite resorts of deer, and our object, in the first instance, was to attain a certain elevation whence these braes and Caldershall Mohr could be spied, keeping near the Grimersta boundary. This we did it for about a mile, when we reached a sheltered position behind some rocks, and made our first long halt.

We had a fine view from this over Grimersta away to our left, where were to be seen several sets or small herds of deer, with one or two fair stags among them. But this was 'banned and barred, forbidden fare,' for I had no right over that boundary.

'Grimersta is fairly alive wi' the deer the day,' remarked one.

To this John Mackenzie made some remark in Gaelic, which, owing to the approval it elicited from the others, induced me to ask what it was.

'John Mackenzie will be wishing, captain, that all those deer were hanging up in Scaliscro larder,' said John, interpreting.

'Fery goot, fery goot,' chuckled John Mackenzie, approvingly, making use of his usual form

of assent; but I told him I thought he was a very sanguinary individual, which only elicited more chuckles.

We sat for some time watching the various little parties of deer, and the manœuvres of the smaller stags to outwit the larger ones. But our own ground had to be surveyed, and John was just about to depart to try the land in front of our advance, when Ian called our attention to a distant roar, which I for one did not at first catch. That singular combination of other animal's utterances, embodied in the challenge of a stag, has a weird and mournful effect when heard in its native wastes. I have listened to it in the dark forests of Cashmere, but, to fully appreciate it, I think it requires to be heard mid the more bleak and desolate surroundings of a wild Highland moor.

John paused. Again came the bellow, and, he declared, from under Caldershall Mohr. Taking Donald with him, he left me and the remaining gillies where we were, till he had made sure of the ground we should have to cross, and also ascertain the whereabouts and size of the stag we had heard.

John was absent so long that I was getting anxious, when he and Donald were seen approaching us from below. He was very serious—a symptom I did not, on the whole, disapprove. His story was brief. He had seen nothing among the small corries which lay between us and the northern shoulder of Caldershall Mohr, but had sighted a small stag with some hinds under that hill itself. While he was examining the ground a larger stag had arrived on the scene, and driven away the smaller one. He was afraid the stalk was hardly negotiable by me, as their present position was very exposed just beyond a piece of flat which lay between the central portion of the extreme bases of the twin hills. The deer had been very restless, but had not moved far from the position in which he first discovered them, and had now lain down. The stag he considered a good one, and well worthy of any exertions, if by any means I could be brought within shot. We decided that at any rate I should go and have a look at them, so we buckled to, and, still ascending, crept round various knolls, and through little passes till we had reached the plane of the ridge, and from behind

the top of a little hill I was able to survey the ground lying between us and the abrupt hill of Caldershall Mohr.

Yes, there they were! A few hinds and a stag, still quietly reposing and quite unconscious of danger. But they were the best part of a mile away in a straight line, and no approach could be made directly from our present position.

John asked me what I thought, and I asked him what he thought, and the result was that, in the hope that they would shortly move to a more favourable position, we would have our luncheon and give them time. This we did and finished our pipes, the wind being strong from the deer, and yet they had not moved.

Matters were looking serious, for no time was to be lost if a shot was to be got at that stag. Every yard we went towards him took us away from the road, which it behoved me to reach before dark, for stumbling about over a rough moor in the dark was not a desirable process. I consulted the men as to their abilities, for I felt very undecided what to do. With deer in view, they one and all declared they would carry on to the utmost of their strength, and get the captain

a shot, and I knew they were really most anxious to do so. John was doubtful as to its being worth trying, for our stalk would have to be made along the face of Caldershall Mohr, the shoulder of which would have to be gained by our advancing under cover of the ridge, in the shelter of which we were now resting. The wind, it is true, blew right over Caldershall Mohr, but might come round either flank and possibly be at our backs as we advanced along its face. Besides, he pointed out, every step took us farther from the road; but still I thought that he rather wished I would decide to try it. And this I did.

We therefore lost no farther time in talking, but proceeded to action. We descended a little, and then kept in as straight a line as the irregularity and unevenness of the ground admitted, so as to reach Caldershall Mohr's flank.

This was all plain sailing, and we effected our object without hindrance. It was now necessary to get another look at the deer, and a steep knoll, a jutting promontory from the shoulder of Caldershall, afforded a good position, while the men took another good rest.

'The deer are there, captain,' said John, 'but'—and he paused awhile—'it will not be easy to get within shot, for they are in an open place. I could stalk them, but I'm thinking the captain will be coming in sight of them, for there are no braes, but jest slopes from the hill like. She's a ten-pointer anyway.'

'A ten-pointer, John!' I exclaimed; 'I'll have a struggle for it, anyhow!'

So again we started; John leading, spy-glass in hand, and carefully feeling the way. Once he turned and looked at me with a very mournful expression. I knew what he meant, for had I, too, not felt the wind at my back?

As we cautiously advanced along the side of the hill, at some distance from its base, we regained more confidence, for no fresh puff of wind had come round from the shoulder we were now rapidly leaving, and we had surmounted several undulations without exposing ourselves to the deer. Round every turn John first carefully crept, and surveyed the ground in front before he motioned us to follow, but the gillies had to stoop as low as possible in crossing some of these slop-

ing ridges. Above us on our left the hill was very steep, while below was a flat, across which we had looked from our first position.

As we got nearer and nearer, without being discovered, John's lips got whiter. He was very keen, and the excitement, while making him very calm, quite blanched him. He came alongside Ian, at one or two ticklish places, and placing his hand on the nape of Ian's neck, pressed his head down. When relieved of this external force, poor Ian's head not unnaturally resumed its normal position, and bobbed up again. Again was the pressure renewed, and the same thing occurred several times, like a Jack-in-the-box. I could not help laughing, though I, too, was by no means free from the excitement which pervaded all, and probably was as blanched as John.

At last we reached a ridge in the neighbourhood of the deer across which we could not go without exposing ourselves. John, however, wriggled himself over, like a snake, and gained the shelter of some rocks about thirty yards in advance and rather up the hill. After examining the deer, he returned.

'Ye'll no get up there, captain, without show-

ing yourself,' he said, in a hoarse whisper. 'Ye must just tak them from where ye are. They'll no be owre a hundred and fifty yards from you this minute.'

'All right, John,' I said, as he placed the rifle in my hands, and the men cautiously and step by step proceeded to elevate my chair, till I could just peep over the ridge. They effected this, and placed it fairly firm on the ground, supporting it at the same time, they themselves being on their knees, or stooping.

My eye at once fell on the stag. He had not winded us, for, happily, the wind, and that very strongly, came round the further shoulder of the hill, and was almost direct from him to us. Still he was uneasy, and stood looking straight in our direction. The hinds were some distance beyond, and watching him.

'I must take him as he is, John,' I whispered.

'Wait till he moves, captain,' he replied.

But that move, I feared, might only be a jump round and gallop off, so I decided to take him as he stood, though the shot was a difficult one, as he exposed nothing but his head and chest. In my situation, however, I was obliged to take



shots as I could get them, and not be very particular as to their being favourable.

So I aimed, pulled, and fired. There was the ping of a bullet, such as it makes when glancing off a stone, and taking its onward passage through the air. I was rather astonished at this, for the deer were standing on mossy ground; but the stag whisked round and galloped off with the hinds.

The wind was so strong that the rifle-shot seemed hardly to have startled them, and they paused after galloping a few yards, apparently a little uncertain whether to run up into the wind or go down the hill and across the flat I have mentioned. The leading hind had already decided on the latter course, and was moving off. The stag turned, and stood for a moment, for he had evidently not made us out, and exposed his broadside, and I got in my left barrel. They then all galloped down the hill, he with them, apparently untouched.

The men threw themselves flat on the ground, and I remained motionless, as we were now fairly in view.

I felt—well, as keen sportsmen do feel when,

after much toil and perseverance and patience and excitement, failure is the result. John was looking quite miserable, and gloom and regret were depicted on the faces of all; but not a word was spoken.

The deer had reached the flat, and were coming gradually round, making for the ridge of hillocks which had been the sheltering ground of the first part of our stalk. I was watching them closely, and suddenly I fancied I saw the stag falter and go lame, but so slightly as to be merely conjectural. Again I thought there was something faltering, something unusual in his gait.

'Why, John,' I said, 'he's hit; he's lame.'

'No,' said John, mournfully, taking no very particular observation, 'she's no hit.'

'Ay, but she is, though,' exclaimed Ian, excitedly. 'She's lame, whatever.'

John, roused to keener observation, took a look through the glass carefully and earnestly, and just then the stag, in jumping a little peat drain, stumbled nearly to his knees.

'What do you say to that, John?' I asked, triumphantly.

John did not immediately reply, but his face

relaxed. Apparently he was hardly yet quite satisfied, but it was not for long.

'She's very bad,' he said, decidedly. 'She's got the bullet, captain, and no mistake.'

The pace of the stag shortly became reduced to a walk, despite the movements of the hinds, who, after galloping on for some distance, stopped, and, turning, eyed their lord and master, wondering at his laziness.

Gloom had now entirely disappeared from the aspect of all. Intense and vivid interest took the place of previous despondency. To a Highlander the very sight of deer brings a refreshing excitement; but a stricken deer, and stricken by means of their own exertions, meant eager thirst for blood.

The poor stag had now stopped, and, with his back towards us, stood, taking no notice of the hinds. Poor beast! His evident suffering moved me to that pity for the objects of my chase which habit has been unable to subdue. The men, however, felt none of this. Their emotions were limited to an intense desire to see the death—a craving for 'taking hair.'

The late afternoon was drawing into evening,

and we anxiously waited for the next move; for we had but scant time to get back before dark. Happily, we had not long to wait. The hinds had galloped away, most probably having winded us, leaving the stag alone. He, after standing awhile, went slowly towards the hillocks and little glens of the ridge I have so often referred to, and right in the direction of our return journey.

‘Now, lads!’ said John, ‘directly the stag goes out of sight, up with the captain, and run for your lives.’

Minutes seemed doubled and trebled as the stag slowly and laboriously ascended a little pass, and at last passed out of sight behind a low hill on the other side of the flat. John instantly seized the rifle, and made off down the slope at the double, while my men speedily got into harness, and followed him at a similar pace. The hill descended, away we went across the flat, perhaps half-a-mile broad. I had often been jumped across peat drains, and hurried up to a point, but it took me all I knew to keep in my little chair on that occasion, for my eager carriers were straining every nerve. We reached

the other side of the flat, but not yet could they rest. John was behind some rocks, and gesticulating to us wildly. We hurried towards him up the steep brae, and, as we neared, he ran back, put the rifle into my hands, and whispered,

‘He’s lying down on the other side in the glen.’

There was no time to put me down when we reached the top, for just as I got my eye on the stag, lying down about seventy yards off, he sprang up and galloped off up the glen. In another second or two he would have been out of sight behind some rocks, when I fired a snap shot, and brought him down with a shot through the back.

Perhaps the men may be forgiven for doing anything so totally opposed to cocker, but the true historian must relate that they gave vent to a weak hurrah, a feeble pæan of triumph. I should hardly have thought that they had it in them, all pumped as they were.

John was tearing down the brae like a maniac, and soon had his knife in the stag’s throat, and finished what remained of life in it. We followed

more leisurely, and all talked, as John, after galloching, proceeded to cut off the head.

I expressed to the men my admiration at the way in which they had trundled me along. Said Donald, 'I wouldna have done it for my life, 'tis only for the deer.'

The stag proved to have ten points, as John had said, and we found that my first bullet had grazed the inside, low down, of the right antler, which accounted for the pinging sound I had heard. The second had hit him in the body, and must have proved eventually fatal, though he might have lingered some time. The third, as I have said, caught him in the back.

A whisky round, and we prepared for our march back to the road, on our way towards which our last run had fortunately lessened by half-a-mile or so.

John with the head on his back, and holding it by an antler over each shoulder, and smoking like a furnace, led the way, a happy and contented man. I was by no means dissatisfied with myself, and the gillies were elate. And so I killed my first good stag in the Lews. It was followed by others, but I never got a better head.

The last part of our journey was fortunately easy ground, for it was almost quite dark when we reached the road, and I was rather done up when we arrived at the lodge. Each was keen to be the first to impart to the 'misthress' the good news of our luck, so as I drove up to the door, and my dear companion, somewhat anxious at our prolonged absence, came forth to greet me, and inquire of our sport, there was a chorus of triumphant exclamations—'A ten-pointer, Misthress N.' 'A gude stag!'