

CHAPTER III.

GROUSE-SHOOTING.

OUR LITTLE MOOR—GOOD FOR WOODCOCK—EAGLES—AN EAGLE'S NEST HARRIED—EAGLES' EGGS—EAGLES HUNTING BLUE-HARES—PEREGRINE FALCONS—WILD CATS—OUR MILESTONE MAN—TAMENESS OF GROUSE IN THE WEST—A WOODCOCK IN OCTOBER—SNIPE—POINTERS—HABITS OF WOODCOCK—STRANGE DEATH OF WOODCOCK—SHOT USED—SCIENTIFIC SHOOTING.

BEFORE detailing other stalks it was my good-fortune subsequently to make, and the luck, good or bad, attending them, I propose to describe the character of our little shooting, and its *avi-fauna*, as well as any other frequenters of that wild spot.

I call the moor *little*, for, though about seven thousand acres in extent, it only afforded some one hundred and thirty brace of grouse in a season, besides woodcock, snipe, and a few blue hares. Compared with those important and well-stocked shootings yielding large bags, this of course is insignificant, but still it gave a little genuine

sport over dogs to those who were contented, like ourselves, with a few brace a-day.

About half the ground was cleared of sheep, that half adjoining Morsgail, and this of course was for the most part our best grouse-ground. Indeed, a considerable portion of the other was almost barren ground, except for the presence of a few aged cocks, who had it all to themselves. Still there were bits which, comparatively speaking, were very fair, notably the steep hill of Mokhlut and its neighbourhood, which was the scene also of various stalks, as it was a favourite resort of deer. A fuller description of this will appear hereafter.

Scalicro was very good for woodcock in the winter; but, as we always left early in November, that charming sport was lost to us, except for a few brace we generally managed to pick up before leaving. A winter in the Lews is, to say the least of it, trying. It is not so much the cold, for ordinarily snow does not lie long, owing, I believe, to some warm current of the Gulf Stream impinging on that bleak coast; but the winds sweep over the land with a continued and remorseless fury unknown in more favoured regions.

Storms get up on the shortest notice, for of these Hebridean waters it may indeed be said that

‘These seas are the field of combat for the winds.’

Such being the climate, we did not venture to stay beyond the late autumn.

By right of its royalty, the golden eagle claims first mention, for we bred our own eagles, and it is not every little shooting that is so highly honoured by royalty. A mile or more behind the lodge, up among some hills, was the eagle rock. A pair of golden eagles built there each year of our tenancy, though not always with successful results. On one occasion only did we harry the nest, and procured two eggs to go to our collection; but evil befel one of the parents on more than one occasion, I fear, during our absence.

The nest was constructed on a broad ledge among some broken craggy ground on the side of a hill dominating the glen below, but not visible from above, unless the intruder got close enough to peer over the rock. From below, at some short distance away, we could see the materials of which the nest was composed, and it seemed easy of access either from above or below

—far easier than it actually was, but still not presenting insuperable difficulties to a determined cragsman, or even an ordinarily active man. I believe that the man who secured the eggs for us was assisted down from above by a rope, under John's superintendance.

On the first occasion on which we visited the crag and its vicinity there lay not very far away the remains of a dead eagle, which it was said had been destroyed by shepherds poisoning a dead lamb, and it had made its way thus far towards the nest, for it was killed in the breeding season.

In 1883, I see, by the following extract from a letter from John, that no eggs were to be had that year. We had given permission for them to be taken for the collection of our kind neighbour at Morsgail: 'Eagle did not lay in the old place after building there, sir. One was found dead near here, whether it was the same or not, sir. Therefore I am afraid Mr. J. won't get any eagles' eggs.'

We have seen as many as three at a time of these noble birds on the wing near the lodge, in sight of which they often came; sometimes,

indeed, in the immediate vicinity, evidently with a view to the keeper's ducks. Our rock was, I believe, the only nesting-place in our neighbourhood. Most of them breed in the secluded and almost inaccessible crags among the heights of the Harris hills, and many a time we watched them winging their way to their fastnesses in that direction, seeming to go so slowly and leisurely, yet, with the powerful sweep of their long wings, cleaving the air at a great pace.

Often, too, we have watched them, sometimes singly, sometimes in pairs, hunting the hillside on our own ground in quest of blue hares, regularly quartering the ground; but we were never fortunate enough to see a kill. Their proceedings called to mind many an occasion on which I had seen something similar in India, though the actors were far inferior both in size and importance, being hawks of some kind or other. Hares were sometimes simply buffeted to death. I have seen two hawks making swoop after swoop at a running hare, each taking up the running the one from the other, and giving the hare no rest, yet not fixing on it. Falcons, wild or trained, of course make a speedy end to

the combat, after swooping; but by some of the tribe it seems to be the aim to exhaust the quarry.

I had a fine view of an eagle when out after grouse one day preening himself on the top of a hill, and endeavoured to get nearer; but he had taken good care to select a situation which commanded all avenues of approach, so I had to be contented with watching him from a distance of some hundreds of yards.

We had with us a little pet rough terrier dog, which used to accompany my wife in her sometimes solitary rambles. It was much the colour of a red hare, and on one occasion she observed an eagle soaring at some distance. Gradually it approached, and persistently followed them as she walked along the road towards home. At times it came so close that she shouted and shook her stick at it, fearing that it took the dog for a hare, and would pounce upon it. It treated her with the most dignified contempt, and quite disregarded her efforts to frighten it away. The creature seemed so uncanny that at last she picked up her little dog, and made the best of her way home with it in her arms. I do not

suppose he meditated any real assault upon the dog, but that he was acting in the fashion of his kind, and utilising the hunting propensities of his four-footed friend below and waiting on events, in case of game being found and started.

How often in India does this happen to the small-game sportsman. A sudden swishing sound, a feathered bolt dropping swiftly and suddenly from somewhere, till now unperceived, and perhaps a wounded bird borne away in triumph. Sometimes, of course, the marauder pays the penalty of his audacity, and gets the contents of a left barrel, but often as not takes his share of the game he has been watching for; for he seems instinctively to know when the gun is empty, to judge, at least, by the time he so often selects for his swoop. John told me that the nearest he ever was to an eagle was one evening when he was walking home by the road. A grouse dashed past just in front of him, and, in close pursuit, came an eagle, which almost brushed him with its wings as it swooped past. The grouse just managed to get into one of the interminable peat drains, and the eagle soared upwards disappointed.

Besides eagles, we were visited by peregrine falcons, and many other predatory birds. My brother shot a peregrine on one occasion when out after grouse, as it exhibited an unmistakable desire to share his sport. I did not hear of any of their nests on our ground. I greatly fear that, despite the assertions of falconers and others, they commit a vast deal of havoc, not only among the sickly, but the healthy grouse. It would indeed be a grievous pity were all these beautiful creatures, which add such a charm to the landscape, and are so interesting to the naturalist, to be improved off the face of the earth; but I can hardly wonder at the gamekeepers' desires in that direction.

Many other of the hawk tribe built in the crags along Little Loch Roag, and ravens and hoodies prevail as elsewhere. No amount of destruction seems to exterminate them. Besides these marauders, we had the great black back-gull, and he is about as bad as the worst. With his powerful beak he could, I should think, make short work of a lamb.

Wild cats we had not; but, what perhaps is worse, domestic cats run wild. These on several

occasions exercised John's patience and ingenuity before he was able to compass their destruction. Where the cats came from I do not know. We were twenty-four miles from Stornoway—at least, I believe that was about the number of milestones. But those milestones—or rather the wooden pillars which did duty for them—had become somewhat involved. It was said that the excellent and able workman whose duty it was to collect and repaint these somewhat perishable indications of space, had performed his contract, and was on the way to replace them in their respective positions. However, it fell out that he met some friends, and naturally an exchange of ideas and of whiskies took place. The result was that our milestone man became somewhat mixed as to the respective destination of each individual post, and stuck them up without a perfect regard to their proper sequence. And there they remained, and, truth to say, I have not heard that much inconvenience has been done to anyone, or any wayfarer been misguided by their somewhat erratic misplacement.

I have said that the chance of getting shots at deer formed the great attraction at Scaliscro. We

killed a few hinds when stags were not to be had, for venison is venison, and a larder so distant sometimes short of meat, and our agreement provided for the slaughter of some. Indeed, we did not kill the number allowed. I shall, however, treat of deer in chapters to themselves.

Grouse were fairly plentiful on some parts of the cleared ground. I think the best day my brother and myself had—shooting near each other, but not quite in company, for my approach to game somewhat hindered a companion—we killed twenty-three brace, besides extras. I see, too, that on one or two occasions I killed thirteen brace to my own gun. But we were well contented with half of that, for we shot for sport, not for the credit of big bags. Indeed, after killing a few brace, I have sometimes stopped. At times, of course, a brace or two was all that rewarded our exertions, especially in the uncleared ground, and we had to work hard even for that.

I do not know if any valid reason has been assigned for the remarkable tameness of grouse in the west and, I believe, north of the Highlands of Scotland, as compared with the east and centre.

This seems to be especially marked in the Hebrides, and perhaps most distinctly so, in the Lews. They will lie to dogs like stones occasionally, in fine weather, up to the last day of the season. In wild weather they do get somewhat wild, and difficult of approach, but they never, or very rarely, *pack*, as the term is understood in other parts. A covey or two may run together, and in snowstorms a number may assemble on any spot cleared by the wind, or in shelter; but, the emergency over, they will again separate, and lie close in fine weather. Even when wild, they often prefer taking to their legs than to their wings, I think.

Especially have I found this disinclination to take wing in Skye. It is very wearisome work, sometimes, running after an old running cock, trying to overhaul him and make him rise, and very trying also for dogs. Fully exposed, he first endeavours to keep about out of range, and works his way along at a very respectable pace. These old stagers are so mischievous and do so much harm at the breeding season that the keepers often beg you not to spare them, but take them as they run. I confess I had some severe

qualms of conscience at first, but I came to recognise how desirable it was that this advice should be sometimes acted on, and with considerable compunction I have done so. On one occasion, last year in Skye, this led to one of the most remarkable shots I ever made.

My dog had pointed, and drew on, evidently after a moving bird. I hurried up as quickly as the nature of the ground admitted, for it was a steepish hill-side, and shortly sighted a solitary old cock making the best use of his legs some distance ahead. The keeper took the dog and we got on in chase as fast as we could, but the wretched old fellow held his own. I used to make my men fill their pockets with stones, to try to pelt them into taking wing, on similar occasions, but had none on this, and it was often unsuccessful. My men could not overhaul the runner, or get within fifty yards.

‘Take him, sir,’ said the keeper. ‘He’s best off the ground, anyway.’

So take him I did with my left barrel, which is choked. He, however, rose and flew over the ridge, evidently badly hit. We followed, and I saw something flutter for a moment near the spot

whence he had risen, and, going up, we picked up a woodcock which had been struck by the same shot. It was quite early in the season—about the middle of October—and the very few cocks which had arrived were widely scattered over the surface of the country, and this was probably the only bird on the whole of that wide hill-side, for, though I beat it, I found no other.

That he should place himself just in the only spot, unseen by me, which would receive the shot which killed him, presents a combination of adverse and extreme chances which, I think, renders remarkable the death of that unfortunate bird. Had it been another grouse, though singular, there would not have been such a discord of probabilities.

We picked up the old cock-grouse quite dead, just over the ridge, and I continued on my way, marvelling at the strangeness of chance shots.

I called to mind how, once in India, I fired at and killed a snipe, and picked up another a little further on, killed on the ground by the same shot. I remembered, too, how once I fired at a bull Neilghye, and a cow succumbed to the shot. How, why, or wherefore, I never could account,

for the bull went off apparently untouched. But this present one beats all the singular shots I had ever made.

Curiously enough, I found on my return that same day that my brother had also had his little experience of novelty in the way of shots. Two snipe rose, he fired at one, and bagged both.

Thinking over wonderful shots brings to my recollection a case in the Lews which may be considered something out of the common. It happened to a dear friend and relative of my own now an esteemed pillar of the church, and not unknown in the cloisters at Westminster Abbey. He was staying at Soval with the late Mr. Hutchinson ('Sixty-One'), who then rented that shooting. He fired both barrels at a covey, selecting his birds, as an old and experienced shot would do; and the whole covey of six fell to his double discharge. Even had he fired into the brown, this would have been a remarkable shot, but naturally he picked his birds out. Very good was he at all sports; for I suppose canons, and deans, and even bishops and other clerical great guns, may have a natural aptitude and taste in that direction in their youth. Many

a time, in my boyhood, when he was a young Oxford undergrad, and a hero of heroes to a small boy about to go into jackets, have I and a younger brother had the deep gratification and honour of assisting to pull off his hunting boots, and of bringing from lower regions the comforting mug of beer with which to slake his well-earned thirst. He was often a welcome visitor at my father's house, and occasionally rode his solitary hunter with the 'Berkeley.' Thus it happened that I acted as his valet, to my youthful satisfaction.

My relative's host, Mr. Hutchinson, with whom I was acquainted, rented several shootings in the Lews, indeed, may almost be said to have brought them into notice; but all concerning these, are they not written in the chronicles contained in that charming book, 'Twenty Years in the Lews, by Sixty-One.' A true sportsman and a great lover of dogs, he has compiled a little work of great interest. I only regret that I have not got it by me to refer to. I think he mentioned that once—and once only—had a hundred brace of grouse been killed in one day in the Lews by a single gun—Sir F. Millbank, then a

partner with him. This too, I have heard, was only accomplished by having the birds previously driven, and congregated in one part of the moor.

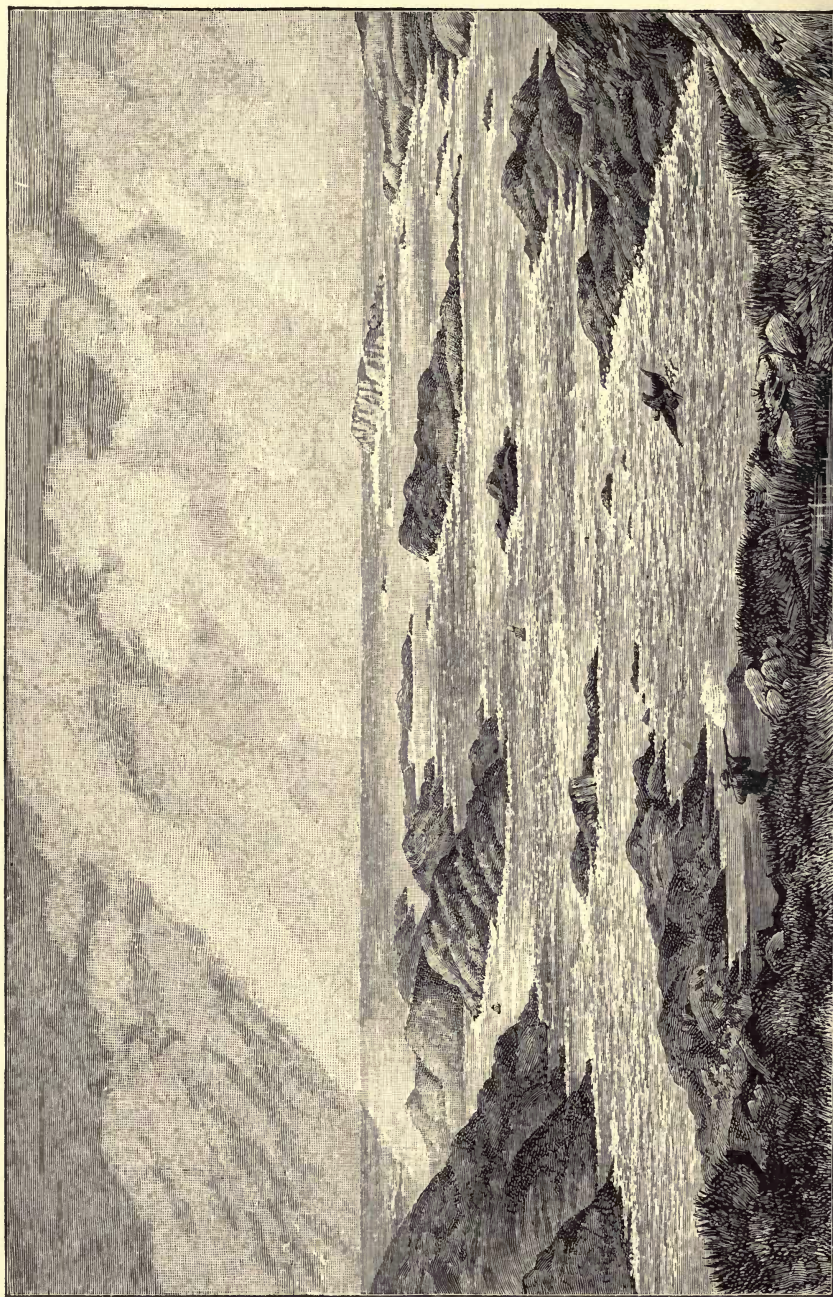
'Sixty-One's' excellent breed of Gordon setters were well known, and highly appreciated. I shot over one on my first introduction to the Lews, and my eldest brother obtained a descendant at Scaliscro, and it has since done him excellent service, though with such a disposition to extreme obesity as to render it a subject of wonder how the old thing can roll over the moor and find game as she does.

I possessed a breed of pointers, three of which—of my own breeding—I took to Scaliscro. Pointers are not suited to stand that rough climate, at any rate in the winter. Happening, however, to have them, I took them, unwilling to go to the expense of buying setters, which I would have preferred. One of these was a case of a gun-shy dog, which entirely overcame its shyness by kind and persistent treatment. In one respect they were very suitable, for me especially, being exceedingly staunch at point, and would stand for any length of time. But I lost them all. I left them in charge of the

keeper, but, in the course of the fourth season, two of them developed blindness. I tried several remedies ineffectually, and brought back with me one only partially affected, and submitted it to the inspection and treatment of a highly-skilled veterinary surgeon. He diagnosed it as eye paralysis, the result of bad housing or bad feeding. In this case it was the former, for the kennels were very draughty and damp. This dog, too, went quite blind, though otherwise in good health and spirits.

Like all the western isles, Lewis is very good for woodcock. They do not breed there, except so exceptionally as to prove the rule, as is the case on the mainland coast opposite, but immigrate in the winter. Towards the middle or end of October, according to the moonlight nights and direction of wind, one or two are to be picked up, but are widely scattered, and it is not till later that they are found in considerable numbers, in certain favourite localities. We had some very good ground for them on Scaliscro.

My brother generally secured the first of the season, and this he did on the 29th of October in 1883. On one occasion I got one



THE FIRST WOODCOCK OF THE SEASON.—LOCH ROAG.

close to the lodge very early, and it was somewhat singular that on the same day I shot a corncrake. I strolled out in the afternoon for an hour or two to pick up a snipe, of which a few were among the old cultivation close to the lodge. I did not intend to shoot any more grouse there.

I had picked up a snipe or two, when a blue hare got up; this I killed. Then a corncrake rose from a point out of some thick rushes. This also fell. I continued my stroll round by the shore under Craig-ny-Owen—the hill of birds—just south of the lodge. A woodcock here next unexpectedly got up out of shot, and pitched again somewhat farther on. I found him, wild, and dropped him by a very long shot. I then killed one grouse, just to make up the variety of bag, and returned well satisfied with my brief afternoon's performance.

Last year, on the west coast of Skye, I also killed a corncrake very late in the season. It was on the open moor, and on this occasion also rose from some rushes or coarse grass. I had previously bagged one close to cultivated land, but this was earlier in the season, and a long way from the place where I got the other.

Mr. Hutchinson says that, in rough weather, woodcocks often lie flat, with wings outstretched, on the top of rocks or stony eminences.

I have sometimes found them in the peat-drains, lying under shelter of the overhanging bank above, and somewhat damp quarters they must find them. Come upon them from their front, and they regularly charge at one in evacuating their resting-places. I have lost shots by this, for, as explained, I cannot get turned round in time, or fire except within a radius of some forty-five degrees to my left front.

I can recall an occasion where they did not behave like respectable woodcocks but acted in this wise, and, out of some seven or eight birds which might have been bagged, I only got two. This was on a capital bit of ground in the neighbourhood of Meavaig on the Uig shootings, ground which I had permission to beat from some kind friends who that year rented Uig. The birds either persistently darted back over me, or went off in the most obstinate way to my right hand, so that I could not get shots at them.

There has been considerable discussion going

on of late, in the sporting papers, as to the use of small shot in shooting grouse. I do not mean to enter into a controversy handled by so much abler men than myself, but I may mention that, with small shot in a choke barrel, I have made some very long shots. In India, as an all-round shot, I found number seven to be the most generally effective. This was in the old muzzle-loading days, when charges were not so easily changed as cartridges are now-a-days, and a shot suitable for all comers, from duck to quail, was desirable. If shooting snipe only in a jheel, or quail in fields, I often used a smaller shot, as I did a larger for duck alone. But for general purposes number seven answered well, and I still possess the liking, born of habit, for that size as an all-round shot.

There has also recently been a great deal written on the subject of 'swing' and 'aiming forward,' and, indeed, science invoked to aid in the elucidation of the mysteries attending the flight of shot.

Our young gunners ought to attain early proficiency, with so much all ready to their hand or to their head. In my young days, I fear, we

learnt our science by experience, and practically adopted the theory of 'swing' or 'aiming forward,' or both, from a perhaps unconscious or intuitive sense that such was necessary to ensure success at crossing shots.