

CHAPTER IV.

SOME OF OUR FAILURES.

RIFLES AND SHOT-GUNS—OUR FIRST STALK—A CAUTIOUS CHASE—THE STAG TAKES THE HINT—ESCAPE OF WOUNDED STAG—HINDS RIGHT AND LEFT—LYING SHOTS DIFFICULT—DISAPPEARS ON THE OTHER SIDE—SOME OF OUR FAILURES.

THERE is something in the feel and handling of a rifle quite distinct from that of a shot-gun—at least, so it always seems to me. It gives one a sense of greater power, of a wider capacity to cope with all comers. This may be but the outcome of Indian experiences, which embrace a more frequent use of the rifle than is possible in England, and in a sense obliges one to be more dependent on it, especially when engaging big game. But I confess to a somewhat similar feeling, though in a mitigated degree, when after deer in the Highlands of Scotland, for indeed it is a grand and true sport that stalking of the noble, antlered monarch of the waste—even

though, in my case, shorn of so much that gives it interest, though not of difficulty. There is a charm and poetry in it quite distinct from that of shooting driven game.

Again to refer to old Indian experience, it seems to me to compare with the tracking of wild boars to their resting-places, and then riding them, in distinction to beating them out of cover with the same object in view. Both forms of the sport were very dear to me, but the former was ever the most cherished, where practicable.

With such sentiments, the reader will not wonder that I selected Scaliscro in preference to a shooting where the rifle would be practically useless, though more grouse might be obtained. My brother had left it to me to arrange, and I fear I consulted my own tastes more than his. However, neither of us regretted the selection, as, apart from considerations of sport, it enabled us to spend many pleasant days in boat-wandering among the beautiful islands of Loch Roag, and in other excursions with a view more to sketching, and hunting for the natural treasures of the sea and land, than to slaying wild creatures. Of these I shall speak hereafter, and proceed then to

relate what befell us on our first stalk of an island stag, for we did it in company.

One day in September, 1880, it was, that John informed us that from the hills in rear of the lodge he had spied a good stag lying on the northern side of the rugged eminence called Mokhlut, situated about three miles by road from Scaliscro, but considerably less by a direct line across the moor, and this latter we took, necessitated thereto by the direction of the wind.

A good deal of the route was hill, and we had both beaten it for grouse, but this was the first occasion, as I have said, on which we stalked a stag, though a hind or two had fallen to our rifles. All went well. From different tops where we stopped to rest, the stag could be viewed lying down in a sort of green pass which separated the higher portion of Mokhlut from other small hills and craggy knolls receding from it. From several of these he was in range, and altogether the position was decidedly favourable for a stalk. But there existed one element of danger. In and about the spot were several sweet bits of green grass much affected by sheep, and indeed on one knoll was the skeleton of an old summer sheiling.

Solitary stags often select such spots in the vicinity of a few scattered sheep; for the latter in the Lews are often half-wild themselves, and ready to take and give alarm on little provocation, and this is probably quite known to the stags when unaccompanied, as in this instance, by any hinds to act as their look-outs.

John, who knew every inch of the ground, and where we could pass unperceived, and where we could not, had laid his plans well. It is true that 'the best laid plans of mice and men oft gang a-ga'e,' and those of the deer-stalker are no exception; but we had no reason to anticipate discomfiture in this instance, unless those unlucky sheep should wind or see us. John was somewhat exercised in his mind about them, for we could see that several were feeding in the neighbourhood. We had to cross the turf fence which marked and enclosed the cleared ground, and this was somewhat of a lift for me, but without any farther difficulty we attained the base of the knolls which gradually ascended towards the little plateau just under the upper part of Mokhlut where the stag was lying.

Here Donald suggested that my men should

take off their boots to prevent the danger of sending stones rolling or making too much noise on the rock at one or two stiff places, up which I had to be hauled by sheer strength. I did not think this necessary, but he had already divested himself of his—for it was our first real good stalk, and he was greatly excited—though the others retained theirs.

John, exceedingly calm, was soon leading us to a rocky bit, behind which he felt sure we should get a good shot, but he at once saw that a position a little lower down was better, and would bring us within about one hundred yards of the stag, and accordingly towards this we moved. We had agreed that whoever first got his sight on the stag should fire. We were getting close to the sheltered top selected, and were fully prepared when——

I shall not readily forget the nervous horror—that is the only word—when an old cock-grouse got up at our very feet, and with a peculiarly exasperating cuck-cuck, flew straight away over the edge towards the recumbent stag. Were it possible for a man to howl curses in a whisper, I believe that man was John. That muttered

anathemas followed the wretched bird—a solitary old stager that ought to have been improved off the face of the earth ages ago—may readily be believed. But no amount of smothered imprecation could arrest or recall that fleet and noisy old rascal. The mischief was done. It only remained for us to rush to the top and see what chance would offer.

Of course the stag had taken the hint. The loud and warning cry of a suddenly disturbed old cock was not likely to be lost on him, or even the flight of the bird. He was galloping away over the shoulder of Mokhlut when we sighted him some two or three hundreds of yards away. I believe we both foolishly fired, but ineffectually.

We examined the place where he had been lying, and found we should have got within a hundred yards of him, if all had gone well. My brother followed in the direction the stag had taken, still on our ground, and again sighted him, but did not get a shot.

Not far from this very place, on a subsequent occasion, my brother killed a nice yeld hind, but Mokhlut Hill itself proved unlucky so far as stags were concerned.

I once obtained a shot at a stag lying down within two or three hundred yards of the same place, and hit him badly, but too far back. I thought at first he could not rise, but eventually he did stagger up after some struggling, and went away slowly with three or four hinds. Again I got a long shot, but missed. This appeared to revive him, for he went away apparently stronger after it, and I never came up with him again, or saw anything more of him, though I hunted far and wide, it being the duty of every sportsman to endeavour, by doing all he can, to put an end to the misery of a wounded deer. That, I think, was the only stag that escaped after being wounded.

On this occasion, on my return home in the spring cart which carried me to and from the places of the day's sport so far as they could be reached by the road which formed one boundary of our shootings, a few hinds crossed the road just in front of us in the dark of the evening, and stood within about a hundred yards staring at us. I had time to get the cart wheeled round, and managed, still sitting in it, to drop a couple of the hinds as they stood, with my two barrels. One was killed dead. The other, badly wounded, gave

an exciting chase to the gillies, and there was frantic scurrying and shouting. They, however, eventually caught and finished it, not a little delighted at this stroke of luck to make up for our earlier mischance.

But the best head we saw on our ground, one of eleven points, I clean missed. On this occasion the wind was in the best airt for our ground, the north-east, and we drove with the object of inspecting the little corries on the side of Mokhlut just above and facing the road.

A brief survey by John disclosed a good stag, with two hinds, lying under some rocks in a corry near the top of the hill. There had been an early autumn fall of snow, and some of this was still lying scattered over the moor, crisp from a sharpish frost. After taking a look, we advanced, and made a good deal of crackling at times; and more than once, as we rounded the successive knolls, still ascending, felt very exercised in mind as to its effect. But there was a sharp wind blowing, and we remained unheard.

We had to compass about half-a-mile of easy stalking-ground before we arrived in the immediate vicinity of our game. What with the stiff

braes and the frozen snow, our task now assumed greater difficulties; but we surmounted them, and reached the spot John had fixed his mind and eye upon. He now squirmed forward to get a last view, and satisfy himself that all was right before taking me up. He soon came back, and announced that the stag was there lying down under a sheltering rock in the same position in which we had first sighted him.

‘I have no seen sae gude a beast on the ground for years,’ he said.

‘How far will he be from the top of the knoll?’ I asked, with a view to putting up the right sight.

‘I’m thinking it will be near on a hundred and fifty yards, whatever,’ he replied. ‘And I canna take the captain any nearer, for there’s a wide glen on this side of the stag. But will ye no tak a drap of whusky before ye go up, sir; ye are looking cold and pinched-like.’

Perhaps I was; for the north-easter was bitter. Perhaps, also, I looked a bit nervous, and John, no doubt, thought the Highlander’s panacea for all ills might develop in me a more lusty frame of mind. But I never find my shooting improved by stimulants, and so declined.

We reached the top of the brae undiscovered, and it took me a few seconds before I distinguished the stag, lying down in the most fancied security. These lying shots are not nice ones. They are difficult; for the stag's body is presented in its smallest aspect, especially about the shoulders. But, as I have explained, I am bound to take, and generally to take at once, what the gods provide; for one cannot say what the next movement may be, or if it be one still to remain within the compass of my range, or leave me the ability to take advantage of it. So I took him as he lay, quite unsuspecting of danger; and at first I thought I caught the sound of the welcome 'thud.' But he started up at once, and made off round the rock, the two hinds with him. I put in the left barrel, but without stopping him, and had the disgust to see all three top the hill and disappear on the other side, apparently quite fresh and unharmed. John and the others ran on, to try to mark them, but they went away out of sight.

We found that my first bullet struck the rock just above his shoulder. The second we could not account for, and, the wish being father to

the thought, I had at first conjectured he might have got it, till I saw them vanish, running strongly, and the men returned with their report.

I greatly mourned the loss of that stag; for this was during the first season of our tenancy, and John and the men were also more or less miserable at my failure, and very probably attributed it to the refusal of that 'wee sup o' whusky.' We certainly saw far more stags during that year than on all the subsequent ones counted together, but were very unlucky with them, as I have in part described. They only came and went in north-east winds, of which we had a larger supply that year than subsequently.

I missed another stag among the small corries of Mokhlut on another occasion, three years later, but it was very thick and dark, and the light very bad; and he went away at once across the boundary on to Grimersta.

Such is a record of some of our failures. I do not propose to dwell any farther on them or others, but proceed to the more agreeable task of chronicling success, or mingled failure and success. Those occasions—and there were one or two—when, though effecting a good successful stalk, I

was unable to take advantage of it, owing to my position with respect to the deer, or to my chair being off the level, I shall leave untold. It is somewhat trying to find deer within shot, and not able to avail oneself of it, after perhaps the long-continued exertions which have enabled one to attain the position of being within range.