

A DAY'S ROOK-SHOOTING.



ABOUT this time of the year, the middle of the month of May, as the shades of darkness gather down slowly and the last streaks of the setting sun fade gradually away in the western horizon, those who have the good fortune to live in old country mansions in a woodland district will hear in the silence of eventide the faint cawing of rooks from their homes in the old rookeries close at hand. It is the voices of the young ones, now subjects of anxious care to their mothers as they swing in their cradles, to the night breeze on the tops of the elm, the hornbeam, or on the boughs of the more pliant ash tree or larch pine. Since the beginning of March Mrs. Crow has, indeed, had an anxious time of it. The old house has had to undergo the customary "spring cleaning;" fresh twigs have had to be added to make it more comfortable and secure, and new carpets have to be laid down in the shape of wool, some gathered from off the thorny hedges, and some direct from the sheep's back, where madam may have been seen perched by the shepherd, working as unconcernedly as if she were looking for worms in a newly-turned furrow in wake of the plough. In time she is forced to stay at home, and save for two hurried flights, one in the morning and one in the evening, to the nearest field of young wheat, she never leaves the eggs of green and mottled black, which lie snug in their beds of wool. Then comes an interesting event, and Master Crow looks down from his perch above the nest, to see five or six hungry beaks opening upwards, and is reminded of his duty as a parent. How he feeds them, or how he feeds himself, is a vexed question, the farmers contending that he is nothing more than a thief at the best; whilst naturalists hold that he does more good than harm in cleaning the land of grubworm and other pests of the soil. Possibly he deserves a few grains of wheat out of every bushel sown, and *that* the farmer should allow for when he measures out his seed; as no one who has watched him following in wake of the plough can doubt that he

works for his living, or rather, to use a vulgarism, "earns his grub." Yet, too many of them in a district is not desirable, so with the merry month of May comes the rook's day of sorrows. The young ones have been envying the old ones, and wishing to try their wings; and on the first nice, calm, sunshiny day hop on to the top of the nest, and then venture out on to the branches. Occasionally some poor unfortunate is just a little too early for his feathers, and tumbles on to the ground, never to fly again; but as a rule the parents succeed in getting them on the wing by degrees.

It was when numerous young ones were hopping about on the branches round their nest, that my friend the Laird of Blackstone asked me over to have a few quiet shots at them with the rook rifle, at his place close at hand in a northern county.

"We are going to have the whole parish—farmers, carpenters, blacksmiths, and all, even to the village dominie—over next day for their annual blaze, and you and I may as well have a few quiet pops at them with the bullet before; for I can't fancy shooting them sitting with shot; it is anything but sport."

Quite agreeing with him as to rook-shooting being anything but sport when the fowling-piece is used, I looked out my little breechloading rook rifle, made by a well-known London maker, and getting out a few cartridges, pinned an envelope to a tree and stuck an ordinary No. 12 gun wad, blackened with ink, in its centre. Stepping back forty paces, I tried five cartridges, and on going up found that I had put three shots on the envelope, but above the wad, the other two being just outside the rim of the envelope, but also above. Going back again I tried five more, aiming an inch or so below the wad, and found that I succeeded in making a good pattern with the whole lot, round and *on* the black centre. I now thoroughly knew my weapon, and I would advise no one to go out rook-shooting with the rifle unless he has "sighted" it carefully himself. If he does not, he may fire away all day, and never kill a single rook, as he will be unable to find out whether the rifle is throwing high or low, or right or left.

In the afternoon I found my way by a short route across country to the appointed trysting-place, and in a few minutes my friend and I entered the rookery together. Scarcely had we done so than our ears were deafened with the clanging noise of the alarmed and indignant occupants. The old birds rose from

their nests, and with a long succession of screaming caws soared away high up in the air, where they wheeled and twisted about right and left, sometimes descending low enough to take a look—in many cases a last fond look—at their offspring, which jumped from the nests into the branches in a manner which plainly said, “What is all the row about?”

“Suppose we choose bird about, just for a shilling a shot?” said the laird. “I don’t care for the slaughtering business, and they’ll all be thin enough when the farmers have done with them; and—say a sovereign for the first fifteen?”

“Well, I’m quite agreed,” was my reply, feeling confident in myself and my weapon; “but the birds must come to the ground; no hanging to twigs;” saying which I took a careful aim at a bird which sat very clear out from the branches on the top of a straight-growing ash.

There was a slight breeze blowing across the top of the wood, and young Mr. Rook was enjoying a nice gentle swing, which was, however, rather annoying to me. However, I got the little bead on his head, dropped it an inch under him, and, taking my chance of the swinging, pulled, and down he came, as neatly taken as a well-driven golf-ball off the teeing-ground.

“Brothers should not be parted thus,” was the laird’s cool reply, and throwing up the light little weapon smartly, he sent a bullet through a bird in the next branch, but toppling over it hung by both feet, much to his chagrin.

“It’ll be a lost bird if it doesn’t come down before I make my fifteen,” I said; but just as I spoke, the breeze, a little stronger, gave the tree a good shake, its hold relaxed, and it came down to the ground with a thud.

Choosing another outsider I was not so fortunate, for just as I pulled he ducked his head, and the bullet went past him.

“My turn next,” was the call. But the laird was no luckier, though the bullet must have grazed it, as it rose and fluttered into the nest, and saved its life for that day at least.

That he was merely aiming for the body, and not to catch the head, I could see, and I was just beginning to wonder whether I should not do the same, as a rook’s head on a tree from thirty to forty feet high is no easy mark, more especially when the summer breeze is gently rocking the tops. If the bullet was merely put through the body, however, there was a

likelihood of the birds hanging and falling on the branches which was not by any means desirable, seeing that they did not count unless they came to the ground.

"This for a win," at any rate was my call, choosing the bird furthest out on the right branch of the old Scotch pine.

The tree was stiff and the bird was steady, and with his head cocked slightly up, as if looking out for some of his vexed parents in the crowd above. Remembering always that my weapon threw an inch and a half high or so, I saw his crown just over the bead, pulled gently, and down he hurried, without the slightest ceremony or leave-taking.

The laird chose a bird in a tree to the left, pulled and missed, reloaded, pulled, and missed again.

"Don't lose your money and your temper at the same time," was my remark as I settled on to his missed bird, but I was not any more fortunate, and he tried again with success, leaving me, however, one rook up.

We kept together, taking shot and shot about all through the wood, and found ourselves pretty evenly matched, standing "twelve all," when he had, however, two birds hanging in the branches. Both of us wished to get to fifteen as soon as we could, and were very hurried in our firing, too hurried indeed to make much execution. If his hanging birds came down to the ground, as they threatened to do every minute, I would be thrown out of it and, though I would have a few shillings the best of the individual shooting, would lose on the whole match. I had just, after missing twice, knocked a young rook off a very high perch, and ran out fifteen, when one of the two came down to the ground, too late, however, to save the sovereign, though of course it was one more added to his shillings.

"Like my luck!" was the call, "let us go on again," and go on again we did for two more matches, one of which I won and one I lost by three birds. The breeze increased as the evening approached, and, the rookery being exposed and the trees pretty high, we found it very difficult work to bring many down with the bullet, and, smoking our pipes, retired as the old crows, which had been sitting for hours disconsolately in the trees of the outlying woods, gathered in slowly and sorrowfully, and making us feel in anything but a genuine sporting mood. Rooks

must be shot ; but, after all, we thought, rook-shooting is no great sport.

Next day, ere the sun was across the meridian, the whole welkin rang with the noise of a hundred guns, and one would have thought, indeed, that a heavy battle was raging in the neighbourhood. The entire parish, indeed, had declared war against the rooks. Farmers had turned out—some with old flintlocks, some with long Queen Anne muskets, and some with no weapons at all, relying upon their dexterity in casting sticks and stones, or their expertness in climbing the trees. "Shot about" was indulged in by some parties, and "give t'owd gun lots of powder, for she loike a lot," was the call on all sides, notwithstanding bruised shoulders and swelled cheeks from the recoil. Then the wads were rammed home by butting the ramrod against a tree heavily, in order to get the powder up in the nipple and "not have her hang fire." Two pipe-bowlfuls and a half, with an old rag on the top, followed by some shot of all sizes mixed with slugs and, in some cases, hard white peas, was the charge used, and most effectually—the sportsman and the rook generally falling at the same time. A few nipples were blown out, one gun burst, fortunately without doing harm ; and the village schoolmaster, in loading a gun which had never been washed out since it was bored, and was as foul as a smoky chimney, had a powder-flask blown he does not know yet where, the whole of his right whisker going along with it. The severest accident, however, occurred to a man who, to cure a kicking gun, as he said, stuck his shoulder to a tree, leaning his head back also on it, so as to have, as he called it, a firm rest for the stock, and so "*prevent the slightest recoil.*" It is needless to inform men who shoot as to the result. The man went about with his right cheek swelled in flannel for a fortnight, and no amount of persuasion will ever make him attend the annual parish blaze.

