

DEER STALKING IN THE HIGHLANDS.

How refreshing! thought I, as my britchka rolled over the last bit of London pavement, pointing due north, to be out of all this "double double toil and trouble," and to be allowed to breathe the fresh air. "*O rus, quando te aspiciam!*" had long been the wish of my heart. I looked forward to the bracing breeze playing over the wild mountains of Scotland, whither I was bound; and my reveries were of the unrivalled feats to be performed at the expense of sundry enormous deer and innumerable grouse. I was armed at all points. Two of Moore's double barrels, and a double-barrelled rifle of Purdey's, were only my principal weapons. Another pair of guns, together with fishing-rods (only for wet days,) boxes of wadding, boxes of cartridges, powder canisters, and all the varied implements of destruction, filled up every nook and cranny of my carriage. There was barely room for my own small person. Luckily I did not require much, being of "stature small, and slender frame." Thus equipped, what could resist me? I felt irresistible; and, conscious of my own powers, fancied myself a Ross or an Osbaldiston. Who has not been sanguine at such a moment? The future lay all before me. The past, with some few exceptions, on which I will be silent, was a dull and dreary reminiscence. I had been in every sense of the word (I confess it with shame) bored. I was sick of "the House," and the people in it—tired of the "*toujours perdrix*," of London society—had been to all the theatres "*usque ad nauseam*;" the opera itself had become tiresome, and even Cinti had ceased to charm. My friendships had become stupid, my loves grown cold, and my banker was overdrawn—*que faire?* Then rose before me Scotland, with its witching scenes, its crags and burns; its rugged hills, and heathery knolls; its black game, grouse, and ptarmigan; but, above all, its deer. It was too much for me! I could not resist the impulse which made me order post-horses and cut the "village."

How refreshing! thought I, as the breezes of Hampstead and Highgate powdered me with dust, and nearly carried away my travelling cap; any thing was better than the dust of Rotten Row, or of Mackadamization, which is now so general a reform, that one is blinded by "*la poussiere aux yeux*." I was in capital humour; I found every thing agreeable; nature was gay, so was I; London was the monster I was running away from, and every milestone I passed in my flight was a new source of pleasure to me. I reached Edinburgh like a "*bossu*" relieved of his hump by some benevolent fairy, having left my hump, *ennui*, the other side of the Border.

My arrangements were all completed, and on a certain day I was to be at Glenfalloch. To let the reader into a secret, I was going to shoot—no, to try and shoot—deer. To shoot deer! What a world is there in those magic words. Every one loves the sport—longs for it—strives to obtain it—from the rich citizen, who hires the deer-forest, the patrimony of some impoverished descendant of kings, to the humble speculator who timidly but advisedly says he is going to Scotland to shoot, in hopes that the intimation may not fall in vain upon the dull ear of the Scotch magnate it is intended for. It is only in the wildest and most extensive tracts of mountain or forests (as they are called, where tree is none,) that the "monarch of the waste" finds refuge and security; and the brink of the precipice or the deep ravine, the course of a torrent or a treacherous morass, sufficiently difficult of access to put a good walker on his mettle, are the strong-holds in which, by secret ambush or by open storm, stalking or driving, you may hope to achieve

your triumph. It does not matter where Glenfalloch is, or how I got there, or who sanctioned the fleshing of my maiden rifle. Never schoolboy with his first gun was keener than I when I first mounted the hill.

Late at night I arrived. The inn of a small town was my quarter. I intended to sleep there! Sleep! independently of the thoughts of the morrow, and they were neither few nor of a drowsy nature, sleep was out of the question. Noises of all sorts—odours which baffle description—a loquacious multitude of ill-bred geese, which never "ceased from troubling"—a public room full of something not much better—bad whiskey, worse tobacco—predominating over the smaller smells: and the squalling chorus of some dozen brats in the street, who surely never slept, or, if they did, took it by turns, completely established a practical "sleep no more."

Never did I feel happier than at four the next morning, when I jumped on my pony, to ride to the forester. I had twelve miles of dreary moor to cross, over hags and bogs, up the brae and across the burn. It can't be so difficult as they say to shoot these deer, thought I; and I remembered how I slew three tame rabbits and an old hen, at a hundred yards, after much practising, at Purdey's. Oh! any one can do it who can shoot at all; of course I can't miss them: and so I thought, and my little steed bore me merrily and gallantly along the road, taking always his own way, and not mine, in which he was always right, never making the slightest mistake. At last the hills began to close round me. Those I had thought little of at a distance, were now, with their scathed summits, towering in majesty above me. The waters pouring down here and there, through clefts in their rugged sides, served to mark their size and extent; and the apparently extreme smallness of the objects which more immediately surrounded me, made me more sensible of the grandeur of the huge outline which now closed in, at all points. Gradually I lost sight of the cattle and sheep which speckled the sides of the hills; then I knew that I had entered the forest; for the deer are not invaded in their territories, either by shepherd or flock. You hear no more the bark of the colley, or the lowing of the herd; the cry of the bird of prey, and the roar of the stream, are the only sounds, except the unhalloved report of a gun, which break the stillness of these solitudes. Suddenly I came into a deep glen, at the end of which, a little cottage or bothy made me sensible that I was near my journey's end. Through the glen, a beautiful stream wound its course. The banks were covered with the most blooming heather, and, in some places, patches of the brightest green relieved the darker tints of its borders; but fragments of huge stones, and blocks of quartz and granite, lying *pele mele* near the side, and in the channel, told a tale of a different kind. The burn of autumn was a fierce and raging torrent in winter. A few short months, and the smiling landscape before me would be a dreary waste. Did I moralize? I believe I did, in spite of the deer.

I found Duncan M'Intosh at his door. He was a small spare man, about forty. I should say his limbs, for activity and strength, were perfection. His arms were a little longer than exact symmetry would warrant; still it did not amount to a fault. His features were hard and weather-worn; but I have never, before or since, seen such eyes; they were hardly veiled by the coarsest and shaggiest brow; they had no softness, nor did they flash with animation, but they had the keen and piercing look which went through you—the gleam of polished steel. A large rough greyhound

was by his side, and looked at him with the closest attention, as he was cleaning his "prospect," as he called a telescope, which, as he told me afterwards, "had gotten a wee thick the morn, when I was searching for the teers." "Weel, ye're no that late, and ye should get a shot or twa, gin ye hae ony luck, and can shoot ony. Where's yere powther? Hae ye balls plenty? Wull ye tak a drap sweet milk and whiskey? Ye'll no want the powney on the hills?" Such were some of his interrogatories;—he was quite an original. I satisfied them all, as well as I could; and, after drinking my whiskey and milk, intimated a wish to be off. "Bide a wee; there's nae sic a hurry; ye'll hae enough on't, I'm thinking, afore the nicht." But, however, away he went, into a sort of byre, whence he produced two striplings scarce in their teens, to whom he delivered himself for some time, in very rapid Gaelic. They never asked or answered; but the orders once given, off ran Duncan junior, and his brother, like two roebucks. Duncan up the glen, and the younger at once faced a huge hill which was the back ground of the cottage. Up went the little one, never stopping to breathe, his foot firm as a rock when there seemed nothing to hold it. His hands were as good, for he clung by them when his legs could not assist him. He was half way up before old Duncan roused me by saying, "Can ye walk ony?" I had just been looking at what "walking ony" was; however I put on a bold face, and replied in the affirmative; besides I was sure I could walk—of course I could. "They bairns wull na be lang putting up ony teers that's feeding wast, so we mun mak a short wad on't. I began to be uneasy as he said this, for he suited the action to the word, and began to "walk ony." Our path lay straight up the opposite hill to that which the boy had climbed. The river divided them. It was not nearly so steep or so rugged, still it was a breather to me, whose movements are generally bounded by Westminster one way, and Cumberland gate on the other. On I went, however, working only upon pluck, and before I was half-way, I was dead blown. "Ye'd as weel rest yersel," said Duncan, "ye're no used to the walking." No, thought I, I can't walk—but if there is a thing I can do, it is shooting. When he sees me shoot! I had half a mind to say, "I'm not tired—no, not in the least," but I had not breath for it, so down I sat. While I was blowing like a piper, I saw Donald looking suspiciously to the weather quarter; "I'm thinking," said he, "we'll nae win up afore the mist catches us. This gave me wings—away we went again, but before we were two hundred yards further, Duncan's presage began to be verified. The warmth of the air was changed as if by magic; on came the mist thicker and darker; very soon both rock and glen were hidden, and the only object I could discern was Duncan's shadowy looking form about five yards before me.

"Do you think we shall get near them in this fog, Duncan?"—"There's nae telling. I'll no ken that afore we're farther east beyont yon flat, (as if I could see a flat!) 'twas by there I see the teers the day, and gin they'll no hae shifted themselves, I'm thinking, tho' the mist's nae gude, we may get a beast yet."—Beast, thought I, what a name for a stag! On we went for some time. The ground now began to assume a different aspect. There were large beds or layers of stones heaped confusedly together, and where any division of these masses appeared, it was an intersection of peat and grayish moss. "These stones are bad for walking," said I. "Na, na, ye're no sae bad a walker."—"No, but Duncan, these confounded stones, I say, cut me infernally."—"Hout, aye—when ye hae walkit mair, forbye the running, ye'll no think sair of yere feet, and gin ye kill a beast."—"I believe so too, Duncan, but—"—"Whisht," was his answer, and down he dropped, keeping one hand behind him, and motion-

ing me to do likewise. A minute passed—I was breathless, my heart beating like a drum, and my knees shaking under me. He meantime noiselessly took out his "prospect," and minutely surveyed some broken ground before him. The mist was still so thick that I thought he must be at fault. He crept back—"I see the teers—we'll nae win near them and the wind in this air, we could try them, ony way, doon bye—can ye run ony?" (Alas! I had not forgotten the "walk ony.") Off we went at a long trot, down the track we had come up, I was not merely blown, but quite "told out." At last he stopped; if he had not I should. There was now a flat before us, I could just see it. The ground rough and broken. The wind direct in our teeth. Here we crept on, he not knowing exactly where the deer were on account of the mist, and I so regularly done up, as hardly to know where I was myself. Down he dropped a second time.

"D'ye no see them there," said he, in a voice like a child's—but close in my ear. "Not I; where?"—"D'ye no see? Yon's a great stag and two hinds—I see them just above yon black bog, they're no above fifty yards off." See! I could no more see than I could breathe, and so I told him. He was evidently provoked, but tried again to make me see; all was in vain. I had walked until I could not see, and if even I could, there was the mist into the bargain. "Weel," said he, "ye mun just wait, and try gin the fog does clear!"—and we did wait! I was up to my knees in the peat bag, with one half of my body recumbent therein, and an elbow well placed in black mud, as my support. I was wet through with the fog, and at the same time, with the violence of running, the "big drops," to speak poetically, not vulgarly, stood on my brow. I hate extremes—*surtout quand cela se rencontre*. I was trembling in every limb, nervous to a degree, and yet I swear that I never thought I could miss. No one doubt of this nature ever crossed my mind. Blessed illusion! At last, slowly and sulkily, as it were, the mist rolled away—first we saw a patch of blue sky, then a segment of sun, cold and watery indeed, but still it was the sun. It became lighter and clearer. We now saw the mountains before us, and the vapour gradually ascending till the tops appeared distinctly upon the sky. "Come awa," said Duncan, "or we'll lose the shot." He lowered himself to the ground in a way perfectly miraculous—like a crab he went on, upon an elbow and a knee, while he disposed of the other leg as a sort of propelling machine, and the spare hand carried my rifle. This he took from me almost forcibly. I had a suspicion, that as I was to follow him, in his irregular movements, he thought it as well to obviate any chance of accidental death!

I toiled after him as well as I could through the peat hag, the bog, the stagnant water, and the rough stones, still I never dreamt that I should not kill a deer. Once he nearly sunk me in some soft ground by suddenly suiting the action to "keep yersel' doon;" another time, he warned me by a low growl that I had deviated from his track, and made me return to it; at last he sat down, and gave me the gun. "Noo tak yere breath and a lang aim—ye hae a bonnie chance at yon teers. D'ye no see them noo?" I did see them! A splendid stag with antlers like a large oak branch was within thirty yards of me, his whole forehead open to my shot. I looked him over and over again—thought of him as my own—had already disposed of him. Up went the rifle, I took a "long aim," fired, missed him clean; I jumped up—an immense herd which I had not seen burst like a body of cavalry from behind the hags. I sent my second barrel into the middle of them. Away they bounded untouched. I turned to Duncan. "Weel! Ye'll surely nae load again."