

CHAPTER X.

Deer-Hounds—Deer Forest in Sutherlandshire—Effect of the Forests on Deer—The Stag casting his Horns—Hinds and Calves—Courage of the Hind—Poaching Shepherds—Value of Horns—Fighting of Stags—Highland Forester—Breed of Deer-Hounds.

WHILE staying at the inn at Aultnaharrow, I saw several brace of deer-hounds of the true old Scotch breed. These dogs, which belonged to Lord Ellesmere, were kept close to the inn, at the house of one of his Lordship's foresters. The tract of country preserved as a deer forest comprises a most extensive range of mountains, the best in all Scotland for the purpose. Reaching away to the north-west and west, the forest takes in corrie after corrie, and mountain after mountain, of the most wild and romantic character. Fitted, too, for scarcely any other purpose than as a refuge for wild animals, the most determined utilitarian could not say that the ground was wasted, nor suggest a better use to which to apply it. It is far too barren to make sheep farming remunerative, and any other way of attempting to make the mountains in that district useful to mankind would be labour thrown away.

In this fine range the red-deer daily increase in number ; so much so, that I have no doubt that, unless they are systematically shot down, they will, in the course of some few years, degenerate in size and beauty from the ground being overstocked ; for, although there is plenty of room in the surrounding wild mountains for the deer to distribute and disperse themselves, still so much do they dislike being disturbed, and so determinedly do they adhere to the forests where neither sheep nor shepherds annoy them, that while these quiet places are overstocked, the deer are almost wholly drained out of all the surrounding mountains. I speak here only comparatively, for of course red-deer are to be found almost everywhere throughout the county ; still, all the sheep-farms have far fewer deer on them than they had before the forest was made, notwithstanding that the number of these animals is probably greater, on the whole, than it was then. Certain slopes and hill-sides, even close to the main road, are never without deer, and the passer-by seldom travels many miles without seeing some of these noble animals. They seem used to the sight of people on the road (although so few *do* travel by it) ; and on a carriage coming into sight the stag scarcely stops his feeding for a longer time than is sufficient for him to take a good gaze at

his natural enemy, when he again continues his rapid grazing, although perhaps not much more than a rifle-shot from the roadside. In the middle of the day the deer are seldom to be seen, except by a practised eye, as they are then at rest and lying quietly, with little more than their head and neck above the rough heath. In the early morning or towards evening they feed downwards towards the grassy sides of the rivers and burns. In very hot weather the stags, tormented by midges and flies on the lower grounds, keep on the high mountains and ridges, where they have the advantage of every cool breeze that blows. Hardy as he naturally must be, the stag does not seem to like exposing himself more than is necessary to extremes of heat and cold. In this respect the hinds seem more hardy than their antlered lords. For some time after they lose their horns in the beginning of May the stags seem to feel helpless and unarmed, retiring to out-of-the-way places, where they remain as quiet and stationary as they can, not wandering far from their hiding-place, till their horns having in some measure grown, they feel more able to keep their place amongst their fellows. I have often heard people affirm that they hide their horns invariably on casting them, but this is by no means the case ; the horns are constantly

found ; I have frequently picked them up myself, and have seen great numbers that have been found on the hills. A man walking across a rugged and extensive range of mountain cannot expect to find very often an object so little conspicuous as a stag's horn, unless he is a forester or keeper, and as such living amongst the deer at all times. There is no doubt, too, that deer have the habit of chewing and breaking up horns or bones, or any substance of the kind, that they find in their wanderings ; in the same manner that cattle in a field will chew for hours together a bone, old bit of leather, or any other hard substance, to the neglect of the clover or grass, or whatever food they may be surrounded by. It is probable, also, that the deer trample under the heather, in the course of their working at it, any horn that comes in their way.

When about to calve, the hinds retire to the most lonely and undisturbed places, where there is little risk of their young meeting with enemies while unable to escape. For a few days they appear to keep them in these safe solitudes, visiting them little during the daytime ; but as soon as the calves have acquired a certain degree of strength, they become the inseparable companions of their mothers. Where the hind is, there is the calf following its dam over hill and dale. At first they are covered with white

marks, but, losing these, they are of a darkish brown, and are well clothed with long hair by the approach of the winter. Although not coming to full maturity for several years, the growth of young deer is very rapid for the first six or eight months. Did they not acquire strength rather quickly in proportion to their after growth, it would be impossible for them to keep company with the hinds in their numerous flights over mountainous and dangerous passes, impelled onwards by the sight or scent of some enemy real or imaginary. Eagles and foxes both make prey of the newly-born calves; though I am told that the parent will defend her young courageously and effectively against either of these enemies if she happens to be at hand when they are attacked: her manner of defence is by striking with her fore-feet—a species of warfare in which the red-deer hind is a most active enemy, and difficult to cope with. I have seen one, when wounded and standing in a burn, raise herself up and lash out with her fore-feet (armed as they are with sharp and hard hoofs) in a manner which made it a service of no slight danger to approach her. Several times did a hind in this manner strike at and knock under water a dog of the most determined courage that I had slipped at her; and equally ready was she to kick out with both her hind-legs at once, so that it was

by no means safe or easy to get at her ; till at last the dog, after being sadly knocked about, left the water, and sprang upon the deer's back from an overhanging rock, seizing her by the ear and then by the throat in a manner that soon subdued the poor animal. Having more than once seen a hind defend herself most courageously in this manner, I can easily believe the stories that I have been told of their success in defending their young against fox or eagle, notwithstanding the cunning of the former and the almost irresistible swoop of the latter enemy.

Deer, from their size and strength, are secure from the attacks of every other wild animal of the country.

Notwithstanding the vigilance and care of the foresters, who in this county are, I believe, all men of honesty and experience, the shepherds manage to kill many a deer at all seasons ; nor is it possible for any number of keepers to prevent this entirely ; though they may be as watchful as possible, the shepherd, from being constantly on the hill amongst the deer, and knowing by experience all their haunts at every time of day and at every season, has advantages over the keeper that no vigilance of the latter can counterbalance. A shepherd has for some days, perhaps, observed that a particularly fine stag, with noble head and in good condition, fre-

quents some certain grassy burn to feed in. There he grazes daily, going thither about four o'clock every evening; and having done so undisturbed several times in succession, he becomes careless, and on leaving the braeside on which he rests throughout the day, he feeds rapidly down the burn-side till he arrives at the favourite spot of grass. The shepherd, knowing well that the deer will continue on this feeding-spot until disturbed, watches his opportunity when the forester has taken some other direction, or has not left his home, or, in fact, when the coast is clear: he then takes his gun out of the stock, and easily concealing the two parts till he is safe in the solitudes of the mountain, he betakes himself to some hiding-place within an easy shot, and to leeward of the place which he well knows the stag will visit at the feeding-time. Having looked well to his copper cap or priming, he waits patiently till the animal is within twenty or thirty yards of him, when a handful of slugs or a bullet settles the business. The four quarters are then conveyed home as convenience and opportunity suit. If the antlers are good, they are another source of profit, there being a ready sale for them to some gun-maker or bird-stuffer, many of whom have constant correspondence with the shepherds, keepers, etc., for the purpose of buying deers' heads,

birds' eggs, skins, etc., which they resell to visitors at Inverness, or even to sportsmen who, taking the stag's head to England with them, pass it off as a trophy of their own skill and prowess. I have known instances of this kind, although it is difficult to understand how a man can exhibit as his own shooting, and nail up over his hall-door, a stag's head which he has bought for three or four pounds instead of shooting it, without being ashamed to behold such a memento of his own weakness and want of good faith.

In my opinion, the general run of the old stags' heads in Sutherlandshire are the handsomest of any in Scotland, in the way the horns are set on the head and in the shape of the horns themselves. The largest and oldest heads that I have seen in that county form a fine, widely-stretched circle, the tops of the antlers arching inwards towards each other. I never myself saw horns with so fine a spread and arch in any other county, though I do not pretend to say that such may not be seen elsewhere. A nobler sight than a herd of well-antlered stags standing clearly defined on the horizon, and combined with the surrounding scenery and all the *et ceteras* of the country which they inhabit, can scarcely be imagined. On the wide grassy plains between Loch Shin and Aultnaharrow, and between

Ben Hee and Ben Cleebriek, I have generally seen a number of hinds near the roadside ; but the stags, or at any rate the older stags, keep higher up the mountains.

These plains must be excellent ground for running the deer-hounds on, and I wished much that I could have remained long enough in the country to see some of the dogs run a deer ; but being summoned at the time to England, I was obliged to depart without even the treat of passing some days in the deer-forest, notwithstanding the Duke of Sutherland's kind permission. Of course I should have gone "*unarmed*," it being as early as the middle of June ; but I am happy to say that (although sportsman enough in my way) I can enjoy watching and making acquaintance with the actions and habits of so fine an animal as the stag quite as much as endeavouring to kill him. Without pretending to disown my love of deer-stalking, I find an enjoyment in watching unseen, and patiently, the animals in a manner which one *could not* do, supposing oneself to be rifle in hand ; for then, such is the passion of mankind for the chase, that I fancy few people exist who would not be more intent on killing the stag than in quietly looking at him. In the present instance, however, I had little leisure for even looking at the deer.

There is a constant succession of fine mountains from Assynt down to near Dunrobin Castle, all frequented more or less by deer ; and the gamekeeper at the castle told me that they came down into the woods close to his house, where, from good feeding and quiet, they became very fine and fat, getting into condition very early in the season. I have frequently seen deer late in the evenings fight furiously with their horns, till the noise of their antlers striking against each other sounded far and wide. The two hostile stags meet face to face, and, charging straight at each other like two rams, each endeavoured to turn the flank of the other as if to get a chance of goring him. The weakest, however, seemed always to have a prudent knowledge of when he was overmatched, and, having leaped quickly aside to avoid being gored, he generally retreated without injury. Sometimes, when equally matched, they fight together in this manner for a long time, making a great rattling with their horns.

Deer-stalking with the Sutherland Highlander seems an almost invincible passion. His constant thoughts and dreams are about the mountain corrie and the stag : get him into conversation on any subject, and by some means it invariably comes round to deer and deer-stalking. He has stories without end, handed down from father to son, of

wonderful shots, and dogs that never failed to pull down their stag. On most points silent and reserved, on this one he is talkative and eloquent. No man, too, has a greater taste for, and a more correct conception of, the beauties of nature: he points out to you with admiration the very mountain slope, the very corrie that you have already marked down in your mind as surpassingly grand. At first you may think him a reserved and rather morose man, but when he finds out that you are not only a brother of the craft, but also a fervent admirer of the natural beauties of his favourite lochs and corries, his heart opens, and he will go through fire or water to serve you: his expression of face alters, he takes you under his protection, and leads you to points of view which you would have travelled fifty miles to see; and, in fact, enters into all your wishes and thoughts with tact and eager desire to please you. Mercenary and greedy as, I am sorry to say, Highlanders in many parts of the country have become, I did not find this the case in Sutherland. The shootings not having been let much, the country-people are not yet spoiled, but still retain, in a great measure, the natural good feeling, the air of high-bred civility, of which most mountaineers have a far greater

share than men of the same rank of life brought up in the Lowlands.

Though a Highland deer-stalker may sometimes break loose and have a day's bout at whisky, he is not, generally speaking, at all an intemperate man : two weaknesses he may have—snuff and smoke ; the mull, with its spoon of wood or eagle's quill (that not a grain may be lost), and the well-smoked and short clay pipe, are his constant companions. If he misses his stag after a severe stalk, he takes a few whiffs to console himself: if he succeeds, and has his hand already on the prostrate body of the object of his pursuit, the pipe comes into play. The first thing in the morning, while looking from the shealing door to see which way the wind blows, there is the pipe between his teeth : and when returning from his day's work he smokes the pipe of retrospection, while he calls to mind all the different hits and failures of the pursuit. Having reached home, fed himself and dogs, and had his moderate allowance of whisky, twenty to one but he walks out, pipe in mouth, to see which way the clouds are drifting, so as to speculate on the weather of the morrow, or perhaps to listen to the nocturnal cries of the birds and animals of the mountain or loch. You seldom see him fill his pipe ; it seems ready charged, always fit for action, and also self-

extinguishing in some inexplicable manner; as on your asking him a question suddenly when out on the hill, if smoking, ten to one but he puts the pipe, with red-hot tobacco in it, at once into his waistcoat pocket, where it dies a natural death in an innocent manner that I would recommend no one else to expect his pipe to imitate.

Summer or winter the Highland deer-stalker puts on his plaid when going out, and, if he does not carry a gun, has in his hand some favourite stick (or "staff," as he calls it) made of hazel or juniper, and cut during some excursion to the low country. His telescope, though good, generally refuses to be seen distinctly through by any eyes but his own; somehow no one else can hit off the focus. Though caring little for grouse-shooting, he is usually a fisherman, and can throw a fly well enough on occasion, and a present of salmon flies goes straight to his heart.

To return to Aultnaharrow. I was much pleased with the kennel of deer-hounds in charge of the forester there; some of them fine, powerful dogs, fit to pull down any stag. This breed of dogs, which a few years ago was almost extinct, or at any rate only in the hands of a very few Highland proprietors, is now rapidly increasing, not only in numbers, but also in size, strength, and other good

qualities. The three finest dogs of the kind that I ever saw were at Foyers, on Loch Ness; and I believe that they were equally admired by a gentleman far more fit to judge of them than I am, Mr. Grant of Glenmorrison, who was kind enough to take me to see them. The two young dogs were undoubtedly among the finest of their race, for with the strength of a lion they were made as much for speed, and as compactly put together, as the highest-bred greyhound at Newmarket. They had all the points and qualifications of a thorough-bred greyhound, from their head to their round cat-like feet. Indeed I suppose that, owing to neither trouble nor expense having been for some time past spared by many English sportsmen in improving this breed of dogs, the deer-hound is now to be found in as great perfection as ever it was.

Like other greyhounds these dogs do not continue fit for service for more than six years. The violent pace and the strains they are liable to from the nature of the ground they run on, and the strength of the animal they pursue, all combine to make them show symptoms of old age at an earlier time of life than most other hunting dogs. In rearing these dogs it is absolutely necessary that they should have nearly constant liberty, without which they neither come to their full strength nor

development. At the same time they are sadly inclined to sheep killing and other mischief: most dogs learn this fault at first by being allowed to go about amongst very young lambs, which are invariably tempting objects of pursuit to wild and mischievously-disposed puppies.

I am much inclined to crossing the deer-hound with the mastiff or fox-hound. The former I prefer as giving strength and determination in seizing and holding a stag. This cross, too, imparts to the disposition of the dog a kind of bloodthirstiness which is invaluable in tracking and pursuing wounded deer, and this is the principal use of all deer-hounds. No forest will bear too frequent coursing; the deer will take themselves off to quieter ground without fail, being far more effectually scared away by the hound than by the rifle.

