

A LOCH IN ORCADY.



IT is one among many, in an island where the lochs lie scattered like fragments of the sky fallen among the hills — one among many, and one of the least known of them all. On it the fisherman casts no fly, or casts it in vain, for fish have never prospered in its waters. It can never be an ideal trout loch, for it is not fed, like its sister lochs, by the innumerable small burns that channel our low hills. One surface-fed streamlet indeed flows into it, a streamlet hardly worthy of the courtesy-title it bears; but for the most part its waters are drawn from the secret sources of the springs.

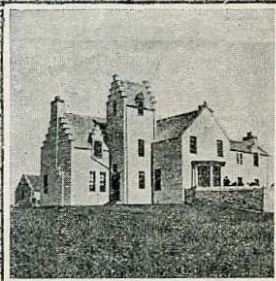
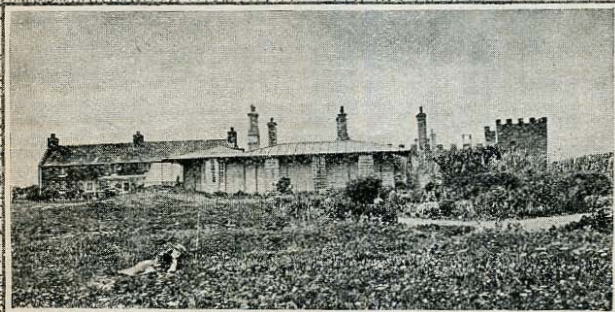
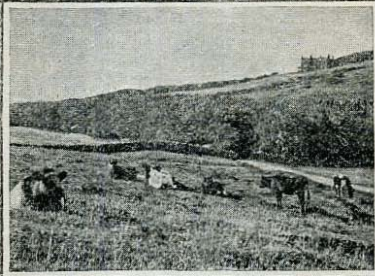
Its placid surface mirrors no hillsides purple with heather and green with waving fern, but from its margin the land rolls back in low billows, squared with fields that year by year darken under the plough and smile again in due season with the homely crops of the isles. Yet the little loch has charms of its own for those who know it—charms that its wilder and more romantic sisters cannot boast. Not a quarter of a mile from its western shore the Atlantic billows boom and thunder upon the cliffs, or roll in, great and green, to burst and

spread in a whirling smother of foam upon the sands; and the quiet of the inland water is thrice welcome to eye and ear when these are dazzled and wearied by the ceaseless turmoil and tumult of the sea.

The valley in which lies the loch runs down to a deeply curved bay, swept and scoured out by the sea, where there is a breach in the great cliff rampart that guards our island's western coast. Up this valley the wind has, through the ages, heaped a huge sandhill which rolls and ripples under its greensward down to the lip of the bay. Between the sand and the clay lies the loch, narrowed by the rising slope of sand that forms its northern bank.

At its eastern end is the germ of a village. A little shop, a post office, the long, low building which was a school before these days of school boards—these and a few cottages stand between the loch and the sunrise. Close to the water's edge runs the high-road leading from a steep little seaport town, away through the quiet country, luring men to the sea and the great world of adventure beyond it. For with us isles-folk the tune that sings itself in the dreams of youth is not "Over the *hills*," but "Over the *seas* and far away."

Along the northern shore, as close as may be to the water, runs another road—a road that leads to the kirk and the kirkyaird, and, incidentally, to the laird's house. Yet because men, who made the road, must preserve an apparent sobriety and straightness of purpose, while Nature, who laid the line between land and water, need care nothing for her reputation, there runs between the road and the water a grassy



Some "Big Hooses."—I.

1. Skail, Sandwick. 2. Binscarth. 3. Hall of Tankerness. 4. Westness, Rousay.
5. Holodyke, Harray.

margin. Here it is of the narrowest, and there it spreads out into miniature capes and peninsulas, where teal love to rest in the early morning, and rabbits come down to nibble the juicy water-plants long before man is afoot.

On the other side of the road the sandbank rises steep and green, a cliff of sandy sward sometimes attaining a height of full twenty feet. There the rabbits have their outposts. The green turf is splotched with the scattered sand from their burrows, and their white tails bob and flutter among the mounds they have made.

This is but the flank of the sandhill. Farther to the west, where man has never ploughed the sand, the loch is bounded by low, green links which swarm with rabbits. Bunkers and hazards there are to delight the soul of the golfer; yet hither that lover of links comes but seldom. The rabbits and the birds have it all to themselves, save where some little fields are set amid the links, and one or two houses of men.

Out of the turf of the bank projects a great stone, gray with lichen, and looking like the broken and petrified shaft of a mighty spear flung by one of the giants who of old waged a titanic warfare from isle to isle. Yet if a vague legend be true, the great stone is rather some bewitched living creature waiting the breaking of spells; for, so they say, there is a certain night in each year when it leaves its sandy bed and goes down to quench its thirst in the waters of the loch.

Yet the birds do not fear it. The wheatear jerks and bobs upon its topmost edge as we gaze and

wonder how and when he came hither. Then with a flirt of his tail he is off to repeat his cheerful, tuneless call upon the nearest mound.

At its western end the loch widens and is divided into two little bays, a bay of sand and a bay of mud. In the more northerly of these bays there is being fought a long skirmish in the great, slow, endless war between land and water; and now victory leans towards the land, for the sand, blowing up day by day from the sea, settles here in the shallow water and drives it back.

Twenty years ago, between the loch's edge and the links lay a field of shining yellow sand, to which the golden plover were wont to come down in great flocks of an autumn evening. Once the sand had established itself, the advance of grass and flowers began. Pushing forward a vanguard of reeds and rushes, they pursued their steady march down to the water's edge; and now, where the sands were, is a grassy meadow, starred in its season with the pale blooms of the grass of Parnassus, its landward side meshed by rabbit tracks, the tiny rivulets winding through it beset with scented beds of wild peppermint and haunted by snipe, and its outer margin giving cover to duck and coots, to water-hens and dabchicks.

There are little islets beyond the meadow, some grass-grown, some still of bare sand, and a little sandy beach at one place, where redshanks and ringed plover run in the shallows. Thither too come the dunlin and the sandpiper, and rarer birds—knots and ruffs, greenshanks with their triple call, and whimbrels, the "summer whaups" of the isles-folk. Here you may wade, knee-deep in clear water, to the

very outer edge of the reeds and find all the way a footing on hard sand. And the reeds will yield their secrets. On this heaped pyramid the little grebe is hatching her eggs, and that reedy platform is a coot's nest. Or at a later season you may chance, if the Fates be kind, to catch a glimpse of scurrying dusky ducklings vanishing among the green stems, while their mother flutters off, making-believe to have a broken wing.

A wide, shallow ditch divides the marsh from the fields on the south, and where the ditch ends an old stone wall begins, marches a little way towards the water, and then breaks off to run round the bay of mud, and so up along the south shore of the loch. Where it turns off, this wall seems at one time to have meditated an advance into the water, and in its retreat has left a tumbled straggle of stones which runs out along a little cape. Here at twilight come great gray herons, shouting hoarsely, to sit gazing into the waters. Here, too, curlews are wont to gather, keeping well out of gunshot from wall or ditch.

The southern bay—the bay of mud—holds a great reed-bed, where shelter many water-fowl. The swans breed there, with coot and water-hen and grebe. There, too, come the wild duck after their kind, mallard and teal, pochard and scaup, golden-eye and merganser. But the bottom there is muddy and treacherous, and it is a very doubtful pleasure to follow the wild-fowl through their haunts in the reeds. About the inner margin of the reed-bed, among the grassy tussocks and muddy pools, is a favourite feeding-ground for snipe. There, too, the

pewits gather, and gulls of many kinds, while red-shanks rise screaming from the water's edge.

Out in the middle of the loch is a small islet or holm. This islet is nested on every summer by a colony of black-headed gulls. There, too, the terns breed, and there the great white-breasted cormorants, which come up after the eels of the loch, sit with black wings widespread in the sunlight. The circling, screaming cloud of gulls which hovers over the islet is a sight never to be forgotten, and the very thought of the sound of their calling brings back those wonderful summer days when all the world was young, and a brighter sun shone in a bluer sky.

There are men scattered here and there about the world who look back to the loch and its environs as to an earthly paradise; and ever in their dreams the loch, the links, the shore are but a beloved and beautiful background to one central figure—a boy with a gun. The seasons may change and mingle, as seasons do in dreams, but the boy treads again the familiar places, and renews his old disappointments and triumphs. Each man sees different pictures and a different boy, but a boy with a gun is always there.

It is strange to think that there may be other boys to-day who hold the loch and all its pleasant places in fee as we hold it by the tenure of our memories. Stranger still to think of all the vanished boys, back through the years, the generations, the centuries, who have loved our little loch, hunted by its margins, and dreamed strange dreams among the sunny hollows of the links. Could they return to-day, islesman born, Norseman, Pict, or Scot, they would find many changes; for man is ever busy

improving and altering the face of his kindly Mother Earth: yet the loch they would see but little changed.

The waters shine as of old under the same sunlight, or ruffle into miniature white-capped billows with the autumn winds, and by night they mirror the unchanging stars. The splendour of the sandhills in summer, when they robe themselves like kings with the purple and gold of crowfoot and thyme; the hot scent of wild peppermint crushed under foot; the trumpet call of the wild swans ringing through the frosty air on winter nights; the pipings and flutings of the water-fowl among the summer reeds; the screaming of falcons and croaking of ravens from the cliffs; and overhead, from dawn to dusk, in the long days of the northern summer, the myriad music of the larks;—all these things they would find unchanged. And though the little fences and fields, the roads, the byres and barns of men have changed the nearer scene, yet man has not altered the “beloved outline of familiar hills,” nor silenced the deep music of the eternal sea.

DUNCAN J. ROBERTSON.

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