

CHAPTER VIII.

FISHING IN THE LEWS.

LOCH OF THE 'BALD-HEADED'—NEVER SAW A SALMON—SEA-TROUT—A
 GOOD CATCH—CAPTURE OF A POACHER—THE BLACKWATER RIVER—
 SALMON-FISHING—ONLY RETURNED ONCE EMPTY-HANDED—GRIM-
 ERSTA—CHROISTAN—SEA-TROUT PARR—A GALE IN THE LEWS.

ATTACHED to our shooting was a loch which rejoiced in the name of Loch-an-phair-n-Mheaoul. It is not an easy name to pronounce in rapid conversation, nor quite suitable to the Sassenach tongue, though rolled out glibly enough from Celtic lips. We therefore adopted its English synonym, which meant 'the loch of the bald-headed man.' How it came by that name I cannot say, nor could we learn from the people about us. So far as we could judge, there was nothing in the topographical features of it or its surroundings to account for it, and, as tradition was equally unproductive of any reason, we concluded that it must have been evolved from the

internal consciousness—to use that much-abused phrase—of some funny Highlander, or possibly originated in his seeing a ‘Boduch,’ or spectral spirit of the waste in the vicinity.

There are many in those regions. There is especially a notable one which haunts the road between Garrynahine and the standing-stones of Callarnish. That Boduch has often been seen, and, I believe, contended with. It is related that a lad once wrestled with him all night, and was quite grey-haired next day. I think I remember hearing that its presence was associated with a light, like that from a pipe. I have heard of another, which in shape of a trunkless head bowls along the road.

However, whether the ‘bald-headed’—as we came to call the loch for the sake of brevity—derived its name from a mundane or spiritual source, it was very good for sea-trout. Its waters were poured into the Grimersta river, but salmon, in which that river is so prolific, keep to the line of lochs, which receive the river after it debouches from the extensive sheet of water known as Loch Langabhat, and do not ascend to the ‘bald-headed.’ We fished the loch for two years, but never rose

or saw a salmon. With the sea-trout we had fair sport, and killed them up to about four-and-a-half pounds in weight. The average, however, all through, including finnocks, was about a pound. I had a coble on the loch which was about half-a-mile long and the same in width.

The best day my wife and I had produced a creel of thirty-two sea-trout, besides brownies. This was very fair, as we rarely began fishing before one o'clock, and finished at six, for it was about four miles from the lodge, and the lady was quite a novice, though she afterwards beat me on more than one occasion. My brother was always too late in his arrival for the best of it, and did not much care for fishing.

The stream under Mokhlut, to which I have referred in my account of the death of the running stag, was one of the sources of this loch, and we have often seen sea-trout in it, all ready for spawning, where it crosses the road, and could have taken out numbers with a landing-net. They were not so safe from the natives as from us.

It is related that on one occasion the late proprietor, Sir J. Matheson, was driving along the road, when he espied a man at this burn busily

engaged in capturing the spawning trout. So intent was he on his poaching that he was not aware of the presence of the enemy. Sir James got out and stalked the man, and himself seized him 'flagrante delicto.'

No doubt the fellow was pretty considerably astonished to find into whose hands he had fallen, when he recognised in his captor the kindly face and commanding stature of the 'proprietor.' I believe he escaped with nothing more serious than a good whigging, on the plea that as he, Sir James, was himself the captor, and not any of his keepers, he was constrained to treat the case leniently.

I have mentioned the Grimersta, and, having done so, I can hardly dismiss with a mere reference the best salmon river in the Lews, and one difficult to beat anywhere. It issues, as I have said, from Loch Langabhat, which is some seven miles long, and thence passes through four other lochs with, in some instances, but brief river-way—or fords, as they call them,—between, before it reaches the sea in a direct line about seven miles. I believe it is divided into five beats, and I think I am not wrong in stating that over two thousand salmon and grilse were fairly killed by rod in one season ;

an exceptional one, perhaps, but still it is good for great takes at most times. The fishing, from the nature of it, is principally from boat, and rough days are desirable, though this may be occasionally dangerous in that stormy region. A sad accident occurred only last year. In endeavouring to make the shore in a gale, a coble was upset, and one of the gillies drowned.

I have heard of twenty-five fish being landed in one day, and in the neighbouring river, the Blackwater, a similar number was once taken; but this was in the days when the late Sir J. Matheson kept the latter in his own hands for the use of his own friends and guests at Stornoway Castle. The Morsgail forest and shootings were similarly preserved in those days, and for the same purpose, for he was not himself a sportsman.

I had permission on several occasions to fish the Blackwater when it was at its best, and once, when the river was in good order, fishing from my chair, I landed six fish myself in the course of an afternoon, besides sea-trout. John, the Scaliscro keeper, was looking after the river at that time, and it was here I first formed his acquaintance.

He knew the river well, and the suitable places to fish at suitable heights of the water.

I remember his pointing to a narrow rush of water between some weeds, ordinarily dry, but on that day with sufficient depth to hold a fish, though out of the main channel. He said a fish would come, if I could cast into so narrow a place. I did so, and a fish did come, just with his nose above water, and closed his jaws an inch behind the fly. John turned to me chuckling at the success of his prediction. After a little rest, I cast again, rose, hooked, and killed a small salmon.

Another day I landed a 'weel mendit' kelt after a fair fight. This was in the month of September, and the sea was within half-a-mile with no sort of obstruction. It was a fish of about twelve pounds, and of course had to go back whence it came. John did not account for a kelt at that season, neither did or could I. It was, I suppose, one of the unaccountable vagaries which beset salmon life and ways.

I only once, in about half-a-dozen occasions, returned empty-handed from fishing the Blackwater in those good old times on that river. It

was blowing a gale from the east, never good in that part of the Lews, with a full water; but, even then, I hooked a goodish fish on a large 'butcher,' but lost him after some play; and it became so 'coors' that I had to return, for the fish would not show.

The favourite fly at that time was one they called 'the squire,' dressed very small, but I do not think the fish were very particular. I remember rising one six times before I hooked and killed him, and offered him several different kinds of fly, at all of which he rose indiscriminately.

The fishing there is very different now-a-days. It is, or was, attached to 'Garrynahine Inn,' close to which it enters an inlet of Loch Roag. At times I believe fair fishing is to be had, but not in anything like the quantity of former years.

There was at one time a system of creating artificial half-spates by means of sluices arranged at the outlet of Loch More, a small loch some three miles up, through which the stream flowed. But I do not think it was in operation at the time I fished there.

By the kind courtesy of one of the lessees of

Grimersta, I had an opportunity of trying that celebrated river on one occasion during our last year's stay at Scaliscro, but was unable to avail myself of it. My wife and brother went, however, but a very promising morning turned out quite calm, and they only succeeded in raising fish without effecting any capture.

Of other rivers and lochs on the island, I cannot speak from personal fishing-experience, except the little Loch Croistan on the Uig shootings. This we fished occasionally during the first two years of our residence at Scaliscro, as Uig was then unlet, and we had permission to fish in it. Crossing Little Loch Roag to a bay just above Einacleit, a mile-and-a-half of walking brought us to it. Personally I much preferred fishing it to the 'Bald-headed' loch. One does establish such preferences sometimes without knowing why. The latter was much the larger, and yet my best basket of sea-trout on each was, I think, the same—twenty-four. It is true, salmon ran into Croistan, and this of itself would have been good cause for a preference; but, independently of that, I enjoyed fishing it more, and no salmon were in it the first season. The big burn or small river



HOOKED! LOCH CROISTAN

which gave access to it was too low all that season. It contains no pools, and fish have to scuttle up as best they can at once in a spate.

On the first occasion of the second year of our fishing it, I, who alone was fishing, rose several salmon, but only hooked one, which I lost after about ten-minutes' play. Some large sea-trout also came at me without my succeeding in hooking them. I had capital sport, so far as raising fish went, but only killed a few sea-trout. John thought it must be owing to the shallowness of the loch. However, we did manage to get a few eventually.

The first I got was a very sharp affair. I had seen a fish rise, and backed the boat down to the spot. He came at the first offer, ran out about forty yards, as hard as he could spin, and then allowed me to manœuvre him close to the boat, when he was gaffed before he had considered what next to do. It was not five minutes. He weighed nine pounds. I got another the same day, and he very nearly saved us the trouble of gaffing at all, by almost jumping into the boat. Besides these two fish, I had fifteen sea-trout that day, from three pounds downwards, and John, who was not

with us, opened his eyes when we displayed our capture on his meeting us at the pier of the 'wintering bulls.'

I was sketching the loch one day, at the very time my brother was fast in a fish, which, however, I think, broke him. We killed a few others. I do not think any salmon were killed in the loch the next year, though I believe fifty sea-trout were taken one day by Mr. and Mrs. H. fishing together.

I have heard that subsequently our successor at Scaliscro did get some. So variable is this little loch! The Uig road passes along one side of it, and on the other there is a high hill which somewhat screens it from westerly winds. At the ends, however, to north and south, it is more open, and from these directions winds rake it nicely, and it requires a good deal of surface disturbance to make the salmon take, though I caught sea-trout with the slightest ruffle of the water. Very pleasant memories I have of that little loch.

I often used only a very light single-handed trouting-rod, and a sea-trout of two or three pounds played as strongly as a salmon with a

heavier rod. Loch-fishing is simple work though, and not in my estimation comparable, in some respects, to that in a rough stream.

On our own shooting, near the road under Caldershall, there was a very nice little loch which received the burn forming the boundary between Morsgail and Grimersta. A deep burn carried off the water to the sea, about half-way between Scaliscro and the head of the loch, but unfortunately there were two nasty waterfalls in its course of a mile or so. Nasty is perhaps hardly the correct word to apply, for they were both very picturesque, and I sketched them both. But the artistic perception is not always quite the same as the piscatorial, though I believe both are generally, to some extent, intimately associated.

We all know how Leech's huntsman spoke of 'them stinking violets' when, in the late season, he found that a very different sort of scent which he loved was bad. My term 'nasty,' therefore, may be considered as used only in a Pickwickian sense, and only applicable to the waterfalls as being obstacles to the ascent of fish.

We prevailed on 'the estate' to make an attempt to blow up these obstructions, but the

plan was not carried out in a sufficiently comprehensive manner. It was so far successful, however, that some sea-trout did manage to get up. I put the coble on the loch as a tentative measure, and took three sea-trout, one about one-and-three-quarter pounds. This was the only time we fished it, as we thought it best to let those who had found their way up stock it. The loch was full of little brownies, and wild ducks usually had a brood there. We got one or two mallard off it.

John told me that he once killed a large *salmo ferox* there. He believes that *salmo ferox* are now extinct in the Lews.

There were brown trout, and some, I believe, of a fairish size in some of the numerous lochs on the ground, but we never thought of fishing for them. On the 'Bald-headed' we killed them up to a pound, and they were as good as sea-trout at that size.

Dr. Day appears to have arrived proximately at some determination as to the identity of sewin truff, scruff, with the sea-trout of the north—the difference being more local than structural.

The grilse state of '*salmo trutta*,' under the

various denominations of whitlings, herlings, finnock, &c., seems to be also fairly decipherable. But what about sea-trout parr? John asked me this question, and I asked him the same.

Here was a man who had been river-keeper for years, and fished all his life in streams frequented by sea-trout, and he told me he had never seen a sea-trout parr. He could not account for it, unless it were that they migrated to the sea in mid-winter, when no one was on the look-out for them. But then, where were they during the first year of their existence, previous to becoming smolts? We never hooked a parr in the 'Bald-headed,' though we caught numbers of small brownies, and yet, in the streams which fed it, sea-trout spawned in great numbers, though no salmon did. If the parr of salmon and sea-trout were similar, as some think, we should surely have caught some had they been there. I fear I must leave this question for ichthyologists, but it is also interesting to the sportsman. Salmon and their congeners seem to have ways of their own, which 'no feller can understand.'

The summer in the Lews in 1880 was remarkable for the unusual heat. Salmon, in consequence

could not ascend the rivers, which became so attenuated as to afford no waterway for them. Fresh water being equally necessary as sea for the health of the fish at the proper season, they suffered in consequence. Many became quite blind, and developed a white spot on the head, the result being the death of numbers near the mouths of rivers. We used to watch them rising and swimming near the surface in Little Loch Roag, where, however, owing to the contracted character of the inlet, and the large amount of fresh water usually poured into it, they perhaps suffered less than in some other parts. But there was little fishing in the Morsgail river and loch that season.

It certainly was an exceptional season that, and it continued fine and warm for a considerable time. But, as I have remarked, it knows how to rain and blow in those regions. We witnessed a very remarkable storm of wind without rain one year, one of the hardest blows I think I ever saw so early in the season, and its effects on the crops were such as I never saw anywhere. It was the first of October and a Sunday. The corn was in stooks, and the hay for the most part abroad in

small stacks. Next morning there was nothing left of what was out in the fields. There was simply a clean sweep. In one wild rush of wind were swept away,

‘The big hopes
And well-earned treasures of the painful year.’

Not a stook, or *débris* of a stook, was left on some plots, but all carried bodily out on to the moor or into the sea. I believe not one fourth of the whole crop was saved or recovered by toilsome gathering on the moor.

But it was a splendid sight to witness; and we had a grand view from the lodge, which, however, shook ominously. We only shed a few slates though, for it was a tough little structure, built with a view to encounter gales. The wind was from the south, and accordingly tore down our loch with nothing to resist its fury. The crests of the waves, when the incoming tide met it, were cut clean off and driven in a large body of sea-foam, perhaps a hundred feet high, right down the loch. I cannot fix the depth, but this hurrying body of spume almost obscured the opposite shore, while the high hills in the distance rose clear above it, for there was no rain.

The roar of wind and waters was deafening, and came ever and anon with a crash which made us think something must be going. One who ventured outside was sorely tried, and had to return at a crawl. The elemental disturbance was general over the island. Several vessels were sunk or driven ashore in Stornoway Bay, landlocked though it is.

It happened to be communion Sunday at Meavaig on the Uig shore, and there was a large assembly there of those who arrived in boats from Bernera and the other shore before the storm was at its worst. After service, the minister prevailed on most not to attempt a return by sea, sheltered though they partially would be among the islands with the wind blowing off shore. But two or three boats' crews insisted on attempting it. One we heard next morning was lost, but it turned out that, after being disabled, the boat was driven through the narrow channel where we fished for flounders, and, narrowly escaping being driven out to sea, got ashore in a bay on Bernera, and the people escaped to the rocks.

Notwithstanding the high winds, it is said that the Lews climate is mild in winter, and that

snow does not last long. It must, however, be sufficiently trying, I should think, to judge by the experiences of those shooting woodcocks there in mid-winter.