

A ROARING GAME.



UNDOUBTEDLY the most popular game north of the Tweed, at the present time, is "Curling," which, when the ice holds, is enjoyed by peer, peasant and pastor, with equal zest. It is one of the few games which, with golf, is considered to be quite orthodox in the eyes of the chief ecclesiastics, the moderators of the general assemblies of the church; and the minister is all the better liked if he can curl as well as preach.

When the temperature is far below zero, and the ice on the pond is holding hard, the question of Disestablishment is shelved, for the Free Kirk man forgets The Disruption, the U.P. man, or United Presbyterian, the Secession, there is a general dissolution of differences amongst the Dissenters and Burgher, and Anti-Burgher, Whig and Tory, "agree." The laird and the laird's man, the minister and the minister's man—the farmer and the factor, all mingle on one common level on the glassy surface of the icy board. The frozen-out mason who finds the sandstone too brittle for his chisel—and the village shoemaker, whose wax will not work under a certain degree of cold—find themselves together with the weaver and the baker arranged in one rink or side against the gamekeeper, the poacher, the gardener and the grocer, and with voices cheery and ringing in the clear frosty air all "goes merry as a marriage bell." "It is the game of all games," says the golfer, as he lays aside his clubs and looks out his silver-mounted Curling Stone handles; "We have always curling in Scotland," says the hunting man as he hangs up his crop, and seizes his sweeping-broom or besom, "and that is more than they have in the south when frozen out;" and "Bother the woodcock, the ice is bearing," is the remark of the keen shot to his keeper who informs him that the severe weather has brought to his coverts the first flights of the long bills. Eh man! but it is a grand game "Curling," young and old all assent, and who that has enjoyed it on a Scottish pond will say that it is not?

The origin of the game seems to be involved in obscurity, some Scotsmen claiming (just as they do for the kilt and the bag-pipes) that it belongs to the land of brown heath and shaggy wood. Others say that it was brought into the country by the Flemings who settled in Scotland about the end of the 15th century. The expressions used in the pastime to a large extent bear out this theory, for we have *curl* from the German *Kurzweil*, an amusement, a game, and *curling* from *Kurzweillen* to play for amusement. *Rink*, the part of the ice on which the game is conducted, also the name for either contesting party of four, means a race or course and seems to have been derived from the ancient Saxon word *brink* a strong man. Be this the case or not, we know that it was a favourite game in Scotland fully three centuries ago, for in Camden's *Britannia*, published in 1607, the author says of the little island of Copinsha, near the Orkneys, that upon it "are to be found in great plenty excellent stones for the game called 'Curling'." Some in their enthusiasm say that it was one of the favourite pastimes of Fingal and his heroes, and go so far as to quote Ossian in proof of this, but antiquity has always been a weak point of the Caledonian—and it will not do to go far beyond recorded history; suffice it to say that the pastime was never in greater favour than at present—when the Royal Caledonian Curling Club numbers close upon 20,000 members, amongst those in the list being keen players in every part of Canada, the United States, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, St. Johns, New Brunswick, as well as at Sydney in New South Wales, and at St. Petersburg and Moscow in Russia.

In regard to the game, the first thing necessary for it is a good strong sheet of ice, of from two to three inches thick, but of course the thicker the better. Only when frost is very keen is this obtainable in Great Britain, though of course in most of the other countries already named (excepting perhaps Sydney) ice can always be had in the winter season. The uncertainty of frost lasting in this country any great length of time, gives a greater zest to the enjoyment with which it is indulged in, and so it is in Scotland, where a real good game or *bonspiel* is always seen to greatest advantage. The first thing the Curlers have to do when the ice is found to be strong enough, is to form the rink. The "tees" or centre points are set down thirty-eight yards apart, and a circle of fourteen

feet diameter is drawn around each of them. Inner circles are drawn at two feet and four feet distance from the centre to facilitate measurements, and the whole may be compared to a modern Wimbledon target engraved upon the surface of the ice. There is no classification of hits however, and all shots count from the actual centre of the tee—*i.e.*—shots within the larger circle, generally alluded to as “the hoose” or house, for, everything outside is as dead to the score as a “miss” at rifle shooting. In exact alignment with both tees, a line, called the “central line,” is drawn extending to a distance of four yards behind each. At the end of these are placed the “hacks” or “crampits,” which are simply foot-rests for the players when swinging their Curling Stones, and the object in placing them four yards behind the tee, is, that the surface of the ice close to the centre of the counting circle may not be broken in their heavy rolling or “wobbling,” when delivered. “Hog” scores are then drawn at each end, about one sixth part of the entire length of play, that is, seven yards up the centre line from either tee, and a middle score midway between tee and tee. If the player, through lack of strength or from a desire to play slow and leave his stone as a guard to a winning shot cannot have the latter induced to cross the first mentioned line by means of the well plied brooms of his partners in the game, his stone is removed as a “hog.” In this sweeping up of stones lies much of the charm of the game, as often the pace is miscalculated, and the order to sweep is given either too late or too soon. Three or four rubs of a besom on the ice in front will bring the latter out sometimes like a horse under the whip. Frequently, too, the strength with which a stone has been played is so misjudged by the skip or captain who gives the orders, that, having been brought by hard polishing to the very tee, it will answer the call of the brooms of the opposing side, and inch by inch, slowly but surely, amidst roars of excitement and laughter, be taken outside of the counting ring altogether. No man in the game is ever idle, for as soon as one has played his last stone he must seize his broom and stand by to sweep up when called upon the stones of his neighbour. Even when it is freezing keen men will get so warm at the work as to cast off their coats, and will play all day in their shirt sleeves just as if it were on a summer’s afternoon.

The Curling Stones which are not allowed to be more than 50 lbs. in weight, inclusive of handle, or more than 36 inches in circumference, are about four inches in height, and, as a rule are made from blocks cut from the channels of running streams, the game being, on this account, known in some districts as "The Channel Stane." The most noted varieties in use are those of Burnock water, an Ayrshire stream, which are of a mixed or marbled grey in colour, strong and very keen, in fact a little too keen for very smooth ice. Sanquhar blacks, cut from the Lochburn in Dumfriesshire, coal black in colour, are durable, and said to be very keen in soft ice, and so advantageous to weak players in times of thaw, are great favourites in the South West of Scotland, as are also Crawfordjohns, from the parish of that name, in Lanarkshire. The latter are brittle and sometimes break when struck hard by a strongly played stone, but they are also good in soft ice, and when there is an inch of water in the pond seem to go through it like frozen-out ducks which have just regained their favourite swimming-place. Ailsa Craigs, cut from the rock of that name, are very keen, particularly those of a grey granite colour, and many of them are in use on the rinks of the Canadian and Nova Scotian clubs. In the north, "Crieff" Curling Stones, of which there are various varieties, are much in use. The handles are fixed to stones, which have but one single polished sole, by means of a screw to an iron projection fixed to the top. To stones which have double soles and are reversible, one being a little keener than the other, they are fastened by a bolt which goes through the centre of the stone, and a nut which is countersunk into a cavity beneath. The brushes used by the players may be of the kitchen or carpet pattern, the latter for preference, but country players still work with the old-fashioned bunch of broom cut from the wayside, or woodlands, and rudely tied with string. With these tied like switches they will sweep the ice in a most astonishing fashion, and possibly get a foot or two more out of a lagging stone than could be obtained with more fashionable implements. Moreover, a loose hempen straw from the carpet broom, or a few hairs from the housemaid's brush, will sometimes stop a stone in its passage, whereas a newly culled broom besom will rarely ever do this.

The great point in the game is to have the winning shot or shots, when the sixteenth or last stone of both sides of four men

each has been played. In order to do this, one must be able to *draw* gently into the ring, into any particular place pointed out by the skip. This requires great judgment, as if the stone is delivered with too much strength it will pass over the tee and through the counting circle, and be lost altogether; if too slow, it will not cross the hog score, and be equally useless. Good players err always on the slow side, relying on the sweeping of their partners in the game to take them on a good few feet when the stone begins to slacken in its pace. *Striking* consists in a player knocking a winning shot out of the circle whether his own remains or not, and a higher kind of feat of the same kind is to "chop and lie," that is, to knock a stone out of the circle, the striking stone to remain inside. As a good shot should be immediately protected a player must be able to *guard* when called upon, that is, to play his stone across the hog score so that it shall remain on the ice covering the winner partly or completely from the next player. If played too near the winning shot it is a *bad* guard, if touching it, it is obviously no guard at all. Occasionally the player is required to *raise* a stone, that is, lift it a few feet nearer the tee, and this also requires much judgment and caution. When a fair, clear, and direct road to the winning shot, or to the tee, cannot be got through, the guarding stones, *inwicking* or *cannoning*, from an outside stone on to the winning one is tried, as at billiards, and occasionally *outwicking*, which is very much the same as the billiard losing hazard, a stone of the player's own side being touched on the outside so as to force it centre-wards to the tee. By far the most scientific stroke in the game is that of *wicking* and *curling in*, which is like screwing in off the red as at billiards, an inside twist or *curl* being put upon the stone by means of the handle, on delivering, which begins to act at the moment of contact with the inside of the stone aimed at, and causes the played stone to work on its iron axis to the centre. More exciting, perhaps, is chipping a winner, *i.e.*, forcing out the winning shot through a channel or port of guards when only an inch or two of the stone aimed at is visible to the player. This is a feat which is generally tried with the last stone, and, if successful, it is needless to state is received with shouts of congratulation. But to a game—"a good old-fashioned Scottish game of Curling."

It is the morning after the fifth night's frost, a hard, black, penetrating frost, and the Miller of Craigengillan, a keen curler himself, has declared that the mill-dam is "bearing as hard as a horn," and that the ice is in rare condition for Curling, and strong enough to carry a horse and cart. So word has been sent to the Secretary of the Curling Club of the neighbouring parish of Strathtaigle, that the Craigengillan curlers are prepared to meet his men on the Gillan mill-dam at ten o'clock, in the annual match for a beef and greens dinner, and for a liberal allowance of oatmeal and coals for the poor people of the winning side. The lovers of "the Roaring Game," as it is sometimes termed, are by no means unmindful of these whom the winter pinches most severely, whilst giving them the means of their greatest enjoyment. Wakeful all night, so hopeful are they of coming pleasures, the players require little warning, and sharp at the hour appointed they gather down to the icy board on which the miller, assisted by his men, has drawn the required diagrams for four rinks, and swept off the hoar frost and snow-drift from the surface. It is a lovely winter scene, such as few artists dare to depict. Eastward the tall pine trees are draped in light garments of white which are suffused in places with glowing red sunshine, and the rabbit runs amongst the fern-work are flanked with icy portals of sun thaw. Even the old overshot-mill seems decorated for the occasion, for spikelets glitter from its every float and a solid mass of crystal, formed by slow and gradual freezing, marks the place where the water was fed from the sluice. The curlers have no time to admire the scenery, however, and in a little time with well plied besoms have the rink as smooth and clear as a large plate-glass window. Soon the hacks and "crampits" or footboards from which the stones are delivered are placed upon the ice, the skips or captains, who are two rival lairds, take up their positions by the tee to give their directions, and the game proceeds. The miller is "head" of the home team, and is asked to draw a stone to the edge of Laird Lamont's broom, which is placed on the inner edge of the fourteen feet circle. Why not ask him to play to the tee, some will ask? Well, the reason is plain, for every stone has a chance of being struck backward during the game, and a stone on the tee would be certain to be soon "lifted," whilst the stone which struck it out would most likely be winner.

The miller miscalculates his strength, or the keenness of the ice, and his stone goes right "through the house" altogether, amidst remarks of remonstrance from his skip, that he has been putting "far too much butter in his parritch lately, and must stick to skimmed milk." Weaver Watson, his opponent, taking warning is more wary, and delivers his stone with nearly a half less force—indeed one would think far too little—but the skip having called on his men to sweep or "soop," they ply their brooms like demons, and inch by inch work it up till it rests just inside the circle. The miller is asked to play to the face of it (a steady lead would be asked to draw past it), and this he does with such force that both stones leave the ring. Weaver Watson then draws a nice shot which is just *too good* for it rests on the very tee or potlid. The weaver and the miller now take up their brooms, and the sweeping stations vacated by Soutar Tamson of Craigengillan, and big Robinson the Strath-taigle village blacksmith. Soutar Tamson needs no directions. He knows well what to do and he does it, for he forces the stone from the tee-head and lies himself, that is, he executes the chipping and lying process alluded to. "Well done, tailor!" is the call to this, followed by the remark: "It will no be a Straithtaigle blacksmith that will say you are only the ninth part of a man."

"Never mind him, Blacksmith," is the cry of Laird Logan, "gie him a wee bit jag wi' his ain needle."

This the Parish Vulcan means to do by removing the stone and leaving his own in the place of it, but he fails, and his stone indeed acts as guard to the winner—a very unfortunate state of matters. The tailor having his winning shot completely guarded by his opponent's draws a second to within a few feet of the tee, amidst warm congratulations and a shake of the hand from his skip. The blacksmith comes down with a rattle on his stone, and so clears the ice for his successor, the parish minister, who is, curiously enough, opposed by the Free Kirk bellman of Strathtaigle. The latter has to play first, and elects to guard the winning stone, which he does with a most judiciously played shot, his stone being by means of his partner's brooms just taken over the hog score. The minister is directed to leave it alone, and to try an inwick from his opponent's second shot on the face of the winner. In delivering he imparts an



"He swings his heavy
granite stone of Aulca Craig"

Wm. Alexander

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inner twist or side to his stone, which catches the one aimed at on the inner edge, and twists in on to the face of the winner, which it removes. It is a wonderfully clever feat, and shouts of triumph and a tossing of brooms and caps into the air proclaim the appreciation with which it is regarded.

"Eh, man, but it's grand," the laird says, "and worth a hundred sermons any day, man."

"The bellman is asked by his skip to remove the guard which still lies on the hog score, and this very simple curling feat he succeeds in doing. The minister replaces it as well as he can, but leaves half of its cheek bare when looked at from the tee. The two skips now leave their position by the tee to finish up the head, and Laird Lamont determines to keep what advantage his side has got by protecting the winning shot, so attempts to guard as well as he can the winning shot on the tee. He is far too slow, however, and all the efforts of his partners with their brooms fail to get his stone across the hog score, and it has to be shoved off the ice. Laird Logan, who knows that his side have two shots in the ring, if the winning one is removed, resolves to chip it. Taking cool, careful aim he swings his heavy granite stone of Ailsa Craig with all his force down the rink. "Is he past the guard?" is the anxious question. "He is on it!" "He is not!" are the calls as it roars along the ice "Past it!" Yes he is! but so close that one could scarce put a sheet of paper between the two stones. Soon the winner is sent spinning away and the Strathtaigle rink lie two shots. Laird Lamont, with his last stone, tries a cool careful draw up the central ice to the winner, but is a foot or so from scoring, though never were brooms plied harder than those wielded by his men. Laird Logan cautiously tries to draw a third on the other side of the tee, but fails, and so Strathtaigle win the opening head with two shots. Little time is lost, and with cries of "Soop him up," "You for a Curler," "Up hands, men," "Not a broom, he is strong enough," "You for a Curler, Laird," laughter, cheers, waving of brooms, and "wee drappies of the best of whisky from the Laird's bottles," the game proceeds till the red glare in the West proclaims that the winter day is near a close. A dinner of beef and greens, *i.e.*, off a large round of boiled beef, served up with green kail and washed down "with tumblers of toddy," follows at the village Inn and at the "wee

short 'our ayont the twal," they depart to meet again in friendly rivalry with some other local club next morning.

Then comes the great bonspiel on the Royal Caledonian pond at Carsebreck, when the Curlers north of the Firth do battle against those of the south. There when the echoes of the starting gun rings in the Highland glens, the men of the Lowlands, with besom and stone, fight the stalwart Highland men just as they did with dirk and claymore in the olden times, and the ringing shouts from a thousand throats would make the traveller, who hurries along the railway by the edge of the meadow, think that he had come upon the scene of an old clan fray. Indeed, the gathering of the Royal Caledonian Curling Club, when ice is strong on Carsebreck, is undoubtedly the most stirring sporting sight to be seen in Great Britain, if not indeed of the whole world.

