

HOW WE OPENED LOCH ARD.



HAVE a horror of the "inauguration" business, and never read of H.R.H. the Prince of Wales busy at work laying foundation-stones of churches, hospitals, and all that, without inwardly expressing my sympathy. Still there are some forms of it which are enjoyable. The opening day with hounds is always pleasant, though the sport is never the best of the season. Launching a ship is not disagreeable work (the printer can make a typographical error here if he likes), for launching and lurching are very much the same sort of thing, combining as they do all the good things of a Scotch funeral, barring the corpse ; but the best sport I ever had yet was at the "opening" of a loch. In Scotland I need not say that there is an opening day there for everything—the bowling-green is "opened," the football-ground is "opened," everything indeed that will open is "opened" for the sake of having some festivities. Every "canny" individual in Scotland is fond of a dram, but generally manages to preface it with the excuse of "Just to drink your health, sir," or "Just another one to drink the health of your coot wife, sir." Indeed, sometimes they will drink to their own healths, and it was, I think, the late Earl of Stair and Dalrymple who turned his double title to good advantage when alive. "Here's to you, Stair," he would say, following it up immediately afterwards with another glass and the remark, "Your health, Dalrymple."

But to my story ; some people will say that the proper word for opening a loch would be "decanted," but that is not what we did, as we took in very little water indeed. The letter of an old keeper explains what is meant.

"Loch Lomond, April.

"Deer Sir,—Noin u are font of throwin a flee, I rite to let u know that I am in good health, hoppin this will find u the sam. Thank God for all his mersis, we oppen Loch Ard on Wednes day next, when there will be some goot fishin. I wull meet you at Balloch at eleven on Tuesday.

Yours trooly,

"RORY MCTAGGART."

It was just the very thing I was anxiously waiting for, so I got down my rod, sought out my fly-book on Monday, and set out for Loch Lomond, accompanied by a genial friend, who was not much of a fisher, but could fill a pipe as well as he could smoke one. It is a grand thing to have a man in the boat who can load your pipe when trout are taking well and you are dying for a whiff or two. He could also sing a good song, and had no anti-teetotal notions about him. It was a cold, bleak spring morning, with a flake or two of snow dancing about in the atmosphere, and to have talked of going fishing would have been madness in the eyes of our fellow-travellers going northward to Glasgow. Still, the thought of whipping the clear water and the purring sound of the reel kept us cheery, and, come what come may, we resolved to meet old Rory at Balloch.

Next morning as we looked out of the window of the Queen's Hotel, at St. Mungo, at eight, there was a sprinkling of white on the grass of George-square, and we could feel that the atmosphere was cold. Ugh! the colder the better, we thought; it will be the better excuse for the passing of the flask. Clad in ulsters and mufflers, we got to Balloch about a quarter to eleven, and found Rory, faithful servant, waiting for us, his rod in one hand, and an enormous creel—quite as big as that of a New-haven fish-wife's—on his back. As the train moved off to the pier a snow shower began to fall, and so we hid our fishing rods, for it seemed rather stupid to be seen bent on a fishing excursion in such weather. I was glad to know that we were mistaken for an engineering party on the way to lay off some new branch line.

“And where and how is Lachy, Rory? Why did you not bring him with you?”

“Oh, iss it Lachy? Lachy will be ferra near to Aberfoyle by this time.”

“What, walking? Why did you not bring him with you?”

“Because he iss a young lad, Mister McToogal, and can walk. Do you think it would be wise for me to learn him to pay for railway trains at his time of life? No, no.”

Such extravagance, I thought to myself. Spend eighteen-pence in a railway train when one could cross the hill and walk the whole distance of 30 miles. Oh, that I had been brought up in this simple Highland style! At Bucklyvie a waggonette was

awaiting the train to drive us to the Bailie Nicol Jarvie Hotel, which is situated almost on the site of the famous Clachan Inn, where Francis Osbaldeston was taken into custody, and so well-known to play-goers from the hot-poker fight in "Rob Roy." Bucklyvie is not much of a place, and may best be described as a railway-station. We got inside, stowed away rods, baskets and portmanteaus, and went off like a newly-hooked bull trout on Loch Shin; but we stopped instanter, as if the whole tackle was gone.

"Hilloa, driver! what's up?"

"Forgot the fish, sir."

"Fish, eh?"

"Yes, sir; fish from Edinburgh, for your dinners to-morrow."

Whew! the landlord had not much faith in the loch then, we thought. So we harked back to the station, stowed away the bag of fish, my facetious friend singing "Wha'll buy my caller herrin?" It was a pleasant drive down the Valley of the Forth, but, ugh! it was cold, and we literally wished, as Bailie Nicol Jarvie did, that our boots had been fou' o' bilin' hot parritch when we set out on such a condemnable journey. We were soon at Aberfoyle, one of the prettiest little places, with one of the nicest little hotels in the Highlands, and after testing the whiskey, sallied out to look at the place so well described by Sir Walter Scott. The first thing that attracted our attention was the hot poker which the Bailie made such good use of, as it now hangs to a tree in front of the hotel door. That it is the original plough coulter we were assured, but notwithstanding we felt sceptical. Then we went to the Bridge, and my friend insisted on doing the capture scene in "Rob Roy," he doing the chief, and I acting the part of the unfortunate soldier who is flung over the parapet. I felt indisposed and withdrew from the piece after the first act, notwithstanding strong protestations. My friend was not, however, to be denied. A number of keepers, young and old, including Lachy, had arrived to assist us to open the famous loch, and so he set to work to organise a "Rob Roy" company, having taken a part in the piece once when played by a party of amateurs. The genial landlord, one of a noted hotel-keeping family, was only too glad to see the fun, and so we started the rehearsal after dinner. A party of three from Edinburgh had arrived to enjoy

the sport of next day, and one ventured to take the part of Major Galbraith, an old Lowland keeper, who had once seen the piece played, taking the part of the Bailie. I did the McStewart. We found a six-foot Highlander ready to do the Doogal Crater. My friend read till we came to the Clachan scene, which was to be done to the very thing, the poker having been disengaged from the tree for the actual fight. In came the Bailie and Francis in time, the former complaining that he has had nothing to eat but the rough tough leg of an old muir-cock, and insisted upon having something to eat. The Major by this had got drunk enough to play his part in real style, and had waited impatiently the arrival of the Glasgow magistrate. The first thing the latter did was to stick the end of the coulter right into the ribs of the glowing coal fire, never thinking for a moment but when he had seen it on the stage the poker was really red. The usual wrangling over the chair commenced. All the time was I nervous, for I saw the six feet seven Doogal creature lying underneath the table, on which was situated a large paraffin lamp, with glass globe and funnel, ready to spring at the proper time like a tiger-cat. At last came an awful scene. The Bailie threatened with the hot poker, the Major, who was very drunk, gave in only to commence afresh. The fight commenced, the old keeper using the blazing-hot poker with good purpose, while the Major yelled with pain. To complete the confusion, the Doogal jumped so furiously from under the table, that he upset it, paraffin lamp, globes, tumblers, whiskey, and all. The real fight could, indeed, have been nothing to it. We captured our Rob on the bridge next morning in a very bad condition. He was awfully bilious. A pint of champagne worked a speedy cure, and breakfast over we were soon whirling along the road which leads to the loch.

The place where the boats are drawn up on the beach is about three miles from the hotel, and is indeed a most romantic spot. The bank fringed with copsewood is said to be the veritable place where Bailie Nicol Jarvie was got hanging by the tail of his coat. Be this the case or not, it is just the place where we could imagine Helen saying, "My foot is on my native heath, and my name is MacGregor." Though the sun on the hills was against us for fishing, it only helped to make more charming the lovely scenery, Ben Lomond filling up the beautiful foreground.

There were two boats out in all, a trolling-rod and two fishers in each. Luck attended our craft, as we had a fish with the phantom ere we had crossed the loch, and so the flask came out accordingly to drink to the "first fush." Cooligartin Bay, a favourite spot, was kindly, and we took out three with the teal wing; while by the back of Duke Murdoch's Island we had a couple more. This little island derives its name from having been a place where a Scotch Duke of that name is said to have taken refuge. On the principal island there is a little lodge, with fireplace and table, and inside our full party lunched, a blazing fire of pine-twigs roaring in the chimney all the time.

We fished till four o'clock, when we found it no use, and crooning an old Scotch song our boatman pulled for the beach. We had not very heavy baskets, but they were fair trout, running mostly three to a pound. We were soon back at the Bailie Nicol Jarvie, where we did not again essay the drama, the Major shaking his head in an ominous manner in inquiring after the hot poker.

Next day we drove by the loch side past Loch Chon, another good trouting loch, and Loch Arklet, now private fishing, which we were sorry to hear, as the trout are said to be splendid. Wheeling to the left just as Loch Katrine came into view, we were soon whirling down the winding road to Inversnaid Hotel, where we resolved to stay and try a day or two on the Queen of Scottish lakes, Loch Lomond.

