

BURNING THE HEATHER.

AN ARRAN SCENE.



T is the month of March, and the keen east winds have been blowing for days. The farmer has been busy sowing the oats which are to make yellow the fields in autumn, and raise "the halesome parritch" of the Scotch peasant; the dust, a peck of which, according to an agricultural adage, is worth a peck of gold, has been flying in clouds along the roads, like troops of spectre soldiers on white horses; and everything in the country is as dry as tinder. Buds and blossoms seem all to be hanging to the stems awaiting signals from the west winds and an opening song from the wee birds, which yet, warned by previous experiences, know that they may build their nests only to have them lined with snow. As soon as the east winds go away all will be budding and carolling, moist weather and sunshine; so the keen, cautious Northern farmer, whose flock of hardy little black-faced sheep is his sole concern, knows that it is time, while yet the law allows him, to burn the heather. A disquisition on the law of "Muirburning" would be as wearisome as the dissertations of a couple of Scotch advocates on the law of multiple poinding, so need not be entered upon; but it may be explained that, for divers reasons, the chief of which is possibly the damage done to grouse and game generally, it is only allowed in certain months, and never after the pairing time has set in. It used to be believed in Scotland that the burning of the heather did damage so far away as the French vineyards, a conclusion possibly arrived at from the fact that in troublous times the French luggers did not care to land their claret in the face of burning heather hills, which were supposed to be blazing war beacons. But in order to raise some sprouts of young heath for the sheep, the long heather under which the little brown muirfowl have snugly nestled, with the snow above them for a blanket, during the most severe of the winter storms, must be fired and burnt down close, a work, too

which must be done with care. The gamekeeper possibly does not like to see many parts of his moor burned, but experience tells him, if he be an intelligent fellow, that grouse require young heather quite as much as the sheep do, and that the burnt stripe is for the good of the laird as well as the tenant. Were, indeed, more old heather burnt according to a well-planned system, and more healthy food raised, we would read of fewer emaciated birds being found on the moors on the "Twelfth," and hear possibly far less of grouse disease.

But the Highland shepherds are waiting at the foot of the hill by the sea-shore, anxious to make a start. It is gloaming on the Arran coast, under the steep, ragged peak of Goatfell, and scarcely a sound is heard save the waves washing amongst the rocky boulders, or the long *whish* of the tumbling Sannox burn as it rolls down the steep hill-side. Away over the Frith the Cumbrae light begins to give out its fitful flash, while the iron-works at Ardeer and Kilwinning raise a red glare in the sky as they blaze and blink away in a fiendish manner to the clouds. Lying far away and low are the harbour lights of Ardrossan, which become more clear as darkness descends. A word or two in Gaelic, from shepherd to shepherd, a Gaelic remonstrance to the dogs—those rough-haired Arran collies, without which no flock of sheep could be gathered on those steep hill-sides—and we are soon moving up and up, till where the long ling and tangling heather almost trips us.

Separated from the mainland by the Frith of Clyde, the good people of the island of Arran still retain all their Highland characteristics, a result due to the fact that the Duke of Hamilton holds back at arm's length the good folks of Glasgow, who have had longing eyes for many a day after its quiet little nooks and crannies, and its heather-fringed beaches, whereon to build some nice seaside residences. A few old natives only have been favoured in this way; and all things considered, this is just as well. Once throw open the place to the Glasgow builders, and in a couple of years would be run up hydropathic establishments, hotels of all kinds—temperance and intemperance—model lodging-houses, rival kirks, and a hundred other nuisances, which have made horrible to the tourist many of the quiet places of Scotland. Mountebank evangelists and German bands would soon follow, and Arran, the grandest retreat on

the Clyde for a day's holiday, would soon be spoiled. At present there is no need for a "Mountain Access Bill," for the tourist may roam through deepest glen, or to the summit of the highest peak, without the slightest interference, unless he should be found molesting game. Within the little cottages all is comfort; for a month's rent from some coast folks in the summer, who, for sake of the fresh air, the freedom and the quiet, prefer the unpretentious little houses, with small square rooms, to more palatial residences of the Cowal or the Bute shores, give them as much as will get them the luxuries of life, and the necessities they always have in plenty. Their holidays are few, but they are enjoyed, it may be said, to the last scrape of the cat-gut or the last drone of the bagpipes. Who that was there on the 10th of December, 1873, can forget the marriage rejoicings of the Duke and Duchess?—the gun-firing on the hill-side, where gunpowder was burnt as if at a bombardment, and round after round given for the happy couple? Away high up on Goatfell anxious eyes watched for the signal from the little telegraph office by the beach, which was to announce from London that the ceremony had been performed, and when it came a cheer went up such as only can be given in the Highlands and by Highlandmen; and ere the rolling echoes of the first round of guns had come back from Glen Sannox, where the reports were repeated with loud and almost startling effect, enthusiastic natives were dancing about the priming-holes again with hot pokers. Then the Highland dance set in with such severity for a week, that the people of the island were rarely on more than one leg at a time. Nor was the occasion without its romance, for at the principal ball the worthy natives, with a kindness which is a characteristic, suggested that "it wass too bad for the band to heff to do all the playin', and not heff a dance too." So a lady gave a reel on the piano while they gave their feet a change from their hands. The result of this was the engagement of the first violinist, and one, too, well known in front of the footlights, to one of the handsomest ladies in the island, and the two are now one of the happiest married couples to be found in the far, far north. The only man who was not in the dance on the island on that day, and he was moving about on crutches, seemed to be old Jamie McKillop, the Duke's faithful old henchman, who had seen him kill his first grouse, and who had

loaded guns in his day to the Auld Duke, besides lots o' Frenchmen, including the late Emperor, a fair shot as he acknowledged ; but on being told that he had been made King of France, replied characteristically. "Ay, ay, I believe sae ; he micht have dune ower a bit place like France, but I wad na say for a muckle island like the Isle of Arran."

But the east wind, cold and dry, is rising up from the sea, and we are on the edge of a flat of old heather which is strong, tough, and ungenerous. A box of lucifers are produced, and in a few seconds a lighted one is applied to the dry grass beneath a tuftock of long tangle, under which may have run many a grouse cock. Slowly it catches and creeps up stalk and stalk till there is a flame a few inches long, when the wind catches it, and away it goes with a *whizz* like a rocket. Further off appears almost at the same time another light, and the advance of the fire seems to be sounded. Fanned by the dry breeze, the flame soon finds its way through the rabbit-like runs, then spurts in fiery jets through some opening. Now and then a heather-knot is caught, and a rocket-like crack is heard, while the sparks fly right and left while some grass-woven patch is suddenly seized by a puff of wind, and spreads like a flash of sheet lightning, which almost dazzles one. "Can that be an adder hissing ?" you ask of yourself, but it is only the sap-formed steam escaping from some sapling's root, the bark of which is almost cracked under the fierce heat. Hemlock stems, too, are crooning away like kettles on the hob, and now and then some loud crack announces the bursting of some little vegetable boiler, where, there being no safety valve, the steam pressure has proved too great. Greedily still the flame rushes up hill ; now catching on the bank of some mountain stream, and racing with a rising fire of sparks along its bank, kissing the haughty rowan tree, and throwing a glare to the very bottom of the pools beneath. Over the crackling noise you can hear the whirr of wings, and across the light, and free from the smoke, goes away an old blackcock for some undisturbed hill-side, where he can watch the red fiend sweep over his favourite haunts. The hare, the rabbit, the weasel, and the field-mouse are all friends in danger, and scamper on ahead till where vegetation ceases and there is no more food for their new enemy, whose appetite appears insatiable. Lighting here and there a patch with a dry gorse

or heather torch, which may have been missed, the shepherds go through their work coolly and easily, their faces lit up by the broad acres of flame, which away ahead shows the smoke gathering like a dark cloud at the brow of the mountain, and in rear lights up the frith almost to the Ayrshire coast, casting a wine glow on the sails of numerous vessels beneath, eclipsing their side lights, and showing their decks as if under a limelight's glare.

It was such a glare that drew once from the very same spot to Turnberry Castle, in Ayrshire, six hundred years ago, The Bruce in mistake, for he had been watching from Brodick for days for a beacon signal for his comrades to come over and attack the English; and in the castle can still be seen the old oak table where he was wont to dine every day when so waiting.

With the rising of the sun, the glare on the hill-side diminishes, though from afar off the grey smoke tells of the spreading of the fire, which is, however, well directed. A south-west shower, which makes the heather spring soon, extinguishes the smouldering flames, and where the fire burned red the heath shines purple over one of the loveliest bays in the world ere the month of August, when many a white-winged yacht may be seen riding proudly at anchor underneath. Many a happy morning can yachtsmen of the Royal Northern Yacht Club recall of the sweet anchorage under Brodick Castle, of flying starts for Ardrishaig, of reel dancing at the Douglas Hotel after dinner, and of midnight victories after long races down Loch Fyne, heralded by the commodore's gun, which made the echoes ring in the glens, and the natives think that a French fleet had invaded their shores. And then what a bonnie place when the gun has fired at sunrise, should you be lying off at anchor or sailing easily with the land breeze from Glen Rosa, is :

BRODICK BAY.

Oh, hear ye no the grouse cock crow, among the heath-clad hills?
 And hear ye no the rock dove coo in the caves o' the Corriegills?
 And hear ye no the lasses sing in the green fields making hay?
 And hear ye no our voices ring as we sail in Brodick Bay?

It's bonnie to feel the fresh, fresh breeze sweep down fair Rosa's Glen,
 And it's bonnie to look at the misty haze that hangs o'er Gnuiss Ben,
 And it's grand to see o'er Goatfell's peak the mist trail long and grey,
 But it's bonnier far to ride with the tide in bonnie Brodick Bay.

Oh, it's sweet to look at the white, white foam rush in o'er the yellow
sand,
And it's sweet to see the white, white clouds trail o'er the mountains
grand,
And it's sweet to look at the purple heath and the burnies whimpling
play,
But it's sweeter to rest on the billow's breast in our boat in Brodick
Bay.

We hae wandered monie a weary mile and monie a mile sail'd the sea,
We've seen bonnie bays in summer days, but a bonnier ne'er saw we,
We may sail and sail 'neath every gale, ay, sail for monie a day,
On a bonnier sight ne'er our eyes shall light than bonnie Brodick
Bay.

