

PTARMIGAN SHOOTING ON BENLOMOND.



HERE are few who have ever sailed up the Queen of Scottish lakes, Lochlomond, but must have envied the happy possessor of that little lodge built on the side of Benlomond about a mile to the northward of Rowardennan. Possibly many would prefer the charming chalet-like residence of Mr. Mair, situated on the green slopes of the loch at the foot of the burn, with its green lawns, its rose-clad walls, and the purring sound of the waterfall away up the hill-sides to hush one gently to sleep amongst the green brackens on a summer's afternoon; but a sportsman would naturally prefer the Ptarmigan for its lovely loneliness, away from every sign of civilisation save the tourist-laden steamer, which, like something out of dreamland, hurries with fitful paddle-throbs through the mountain mist, and disappears again round a pine-clad island, while the music of some itinerant band echoes through the hills, and the sunlight causes the dancing wake to sparkle in a hundred colours. Here you can see the trout jump in the lake below, while as you dress you can watch the black-cock sitting proudly on the alder-tree above, and hearken to the crow of the grouse cock on the mountain-side. Here, while the ladybird is bathing herself in the hollow of a dew-filled rose, you may, towel in hand, trot through the hazels, and plunge from some grassy knoll into the limpid water, a fit mirror for any maiden, and take a few strokes while you breathe the clear, cool air, which never knew smoke nor coal-distilled fog. Fit residence for poet, philosopher, author, or artist, the Ptarmigan is one of the very ideal residences of a sportsman—a born sportsman, who loves sport for its own sake, not a modern manufactured one, who submits to it for the sake of appearances. The man, indeed, who shoots grouse on the Ptarmigan hill, will not need to be a patent-leatherbooted muff, for there is no harder walking to be done in making a bag in the whole of Scotland.

Such was our experience some years ago when enjoying the hospitality of a friend who held a sub-lease of the place for the season. The heather had yielded fair sport in the shape of grouse, and the loch had been kind and generous withal as regards trout, while an occasional visit to Loch Long by way of Tarbert gave us a sniff of the salt water, and a basket of cod and lythe, for the long sea lake winds up in eel-like fashion far inland from the Frith of Clyde, and lies just three miles over from its fair freshwater sister at the place mentioned.

It was at the end of the season, when the brackens were bending frail and brown, and the leaves were beginning to leave the trees before every fresh blast of wind which swept across the loch from the westward. The boats had diminished the number of their voyages, the Cook's tourists had gone off to warmer climes, and the porters at the piers were troubled more with the putting on board of sheepskins and the like than with hampers of game and portmanteaus. A cold, wintry feeling in the mornings made one look almost instinctively to the hilltops, and there would one see the patches of snow which showed that during the night wild weather had been on its wintry war-path. December was close at hand, and possibly the grouse and the blackcock knew that on the 10th of that month they would be again safe under cover of the law, and free till the next 12th of August to fly the heather unmolested. Sportsmen all wanted variety, and our small party wanted ptarmigan, of which it was known there were a few on what is known as the ptarmigan spur of Benlomond, from which the lodge derives its name. Perhaps some of the fair ones had to do with it, for ptarmigan's claw brooches and shawl-pins were fashionable. And everyone knows that if a gull wing, a teal breast, or throat-flecked cravat of the stately heron is wanted for a lady, you are no sportsman in her eyes if you cannot secure it, no matter how clever you may be with the gun. But a truce to explanations.

The Highland keeper, our guide, is waiting to pilot us up the rugged sides of the mountain. Hill-climbing has come easy to him from long practice, and he walks on level ground as if his feet were not made for it. He knows every part of the hill and every part of the loch below. He can dress his own flies, make up his own tackle, pull a boat for an angler to per-

fection, and handle a gaff or a landing-net with certainty. On land he knows how to keep his boats free from dry rot, his guns clear from rust, and his dogs in a cool-nosed, clean-skinned, healthy condition; he can lay off a lawn-tennis ground, tinker up a burst water-pipe, and pack game with any man; while if you want some music he is always good for a pibroch to rouse you at breakfast-time in the mornings or make you to get to bed in the evening. These are the qualifications which we would like for every Highland keeper, but the man who possesses them is not always attainable. With moderately light shooting-boots (the cobbler who makes the shop-window shooting-boots ought to be condemned to wear them) we follow as best we can, thankful at times for a wee bit rest at the foot of some more than usually steep face to recover our winds. Avoiding treacherous patches of flow moss, and jumping from peat hag to peat hag, we make our way, thinking every minute that we shall reach the summit, but as yet it is still away up amongst the mist. Occasionally a white hare scrambles, rabbit-like, through the short scrub heather; but we heed it not. We are for white feather alone; not that we mean to show any, but white fur has for the time being lost its attractions. On the edge of a precipice we halt for a minute or two while the keeper examines some holes in the face carefully.

"Yes," he says, "there is no doubt the tod's here yet"—the tod being the Scotch name for the fox, or, possibly, rather the mountain fox, which lives on the Highland hillsides. "Well," he says, renewing his journey, "there will be work here for us all if we be spared to the spring time."

"Climb, climb, climb!" is still the call, and one could almost imagine himself in one of the ladder-shafted lead mines of Wales. The islets on the loch are getting smaller, and we can see little narrow belts of water by Inchtavannach and Rosdhu, which were not distinctly seen before. The atmosphere is getting colder, the rocks are getting barer, and vegetation is beginning to get more and more scant. We are getting near to the region of the ptarmigans and mountain doves at last, for here, when in their darker plumage in the summer mornings of their courtship, has our keeper, when out watching for the mountain fox, listened to their soft "cooing" and the amorous "ruff e roo" of the male bird. Up there, away from all sounds of civilisation,

with nought but the song of the mountain ouzel to cheer them, lives in solitude the little grouse of the hill, which in its nature and habits more resembles the pigeon than its feathered brother of the moorland. What plants grow on the bare rocks afford it food, and it cares not to come down the hill like the red grouse or the blackcock, and search for a living when its stock of berries is scant. In summer it lives joyously in the sunshine light of early and late sun-rise ; in winter, amongst the snow, it passes its time cheerfully under the blankets of mist, or sits sheltered in a crevice when the fierce gales sweep across the summit in all their fury, like a storm-driven seagull on some green field by the surf-beaten shore. Changing its plumage, as the hills change their covering, from a darker or browner shade to a deep white by November, it is not easy to detect it sitting when occasional patches of snow cover the ground, but unfortunately for itself it does not dread guns, and when flushed flies a short distance off and sits down again.

But our guide is creeping twenty yards above us on hands and knees, for he knows their nesting ground, and expects to find them very soon. We follow as best we can, taking care that the muzzles of our guns shall always look right and left of us in case of accident, for there is no saying how or when accidents will happen. The keeper, however, is on his way downwards, and we halt. "They are up the hill to the right," he says, and by making a slight detour we shall just get right under them. Climbing down hill, as an Irishman would say, is exceedingly pleasant work after a long climb up, and so we enjoy the change. Bending to the right, we half stumble, half crawl, up a steep, rocky face, and as the keeper retires, after peering over the edge and pointing where they are, with our shooting caps shoved back into our pockets, we creep up with guns in front. Yes, there they are, there can be no doubt, and all within thirty yards. Raising ourselves on our left knee in military fashion, we are just in time to knock down a bird as it rises in a sort of "fluffing" fashion like a disturbed bird on a house-top, and knock it over in time to wheel and secure a second with our left. My friend has been less lucky, for he missed with his first, though he secured a bird with his second. Wrapping up the lovely-plumaged little things, whose white feathers were stained with little scarlet drops, we struck across a flat piece of the hill, in

order to catch them at another point. Coming on them too suddenly, however, they rose and flew out of view without giving us a chance. Still our guide did not despair, for he knew that they would not go very far away, preferring to circle round their nesting-ground to the long, straight, down-hill and away flight of the red grouse. After some cold scrambling work amongst boulders, through soft mosses and across gullies, we walked up to the edge of a bold face, and looking over managed to secure a brace as they fluttered carelessly into the mist, which was slowly trailing across the mountain side. With this small bag we were content, for a wild afternoon was promised, and we thought it high time to make for the cosy lodge below. After all the ptarmigan does not afford much sport even where plentiful, as the bird wants the "go" of game of the southern slopes, and the sensation of killing him is scarcely worth the climb. Norway, however, is more properly his country, as in Scotland he is only to be found on the peaks of the highest mountains, and possibly now on Benlomond there are few coveys to be found, though on the hills of the Argyllshire side of the loch they are said to be more common.

