


OUR OPENING DAY ON THE MOORS.

“O to Scotland without money! To Scotland without money! Lord, how some people understand geography! We might as well set sail for Patagonia upon a cork jacket,” truly observes Jarvis in the “Good Natured Man,” and away up here we re-echo his assertion indeed. “Hech me,” we hear our landlord say, “come to Scotland without siller indeed! To Scotland without siller! Hech me, how some folks dinna understan’ mainners; ye may as weel try to jump ower Ben Neevish on a puddock’s back.” Yes, you must take money to Scotland, more especially if you start there in the autumn, and after all you need not expect too much for it. “Send me on all your customers, and I’ll send ye on all mine,” is the motto of Duncan and Dougall, and the whole clan of hotel-keepers, and they do send you on with a vengeance. You have scarcely got to sleep for the snores of one of your numerous shake-down bedfellows on the floor (“all the reklar pedd is needed for the leddies,”) than clang, clang, goes a steamboat bell, and in half-an-hour you are off for fresh scenes and fresh landlords. One thing is certain, you do not need to care how your boots are cleaned in the morning when sailing, if you mean breakfasting on the boats.

“Hey, boots! ho, boots! how the deuce is this?” was the call on all sides but a few mornings before the Twelfth at the coffee-room door of a well-known Oban hotel, where twelve male passengers lay down together on the floor; “I’ve only got one of my boots blacked.”

“Ay, Ay,” was the canny reply; “I brush all the right foots at a time, and then I comes down and brushes the left foots, if you has time to wait; fair play is a shewel, and there’s the steamboat’s bell, now,” and he grinned a genuine Celtic grin, as we rushed off to catch the steamer rounding into the pier, after paying dearly for bed and attendance, the attendants being of a class which you would rather do without in a bed. Oh, but it is a *dear, dear* bonnie country,

Where sportsmen have to pay, tis fact, for every Scottish deer,
 Just twice the price they'd have to pay for one good English steer ;
 Where every grouse they have to kill costs, ere it is made cold,
 Just one good ounce of English lead, and one good ounce of gold.

But with the brushed and unbrushed boots under a table which contains all the good things of a Scotch breakfast, we have little reason to complain, and soon are sailing, not with a free sheet but with free-going paddles, through Kerrara Sound, our cry still being "Northward Ho!" We have all classes of company on board, Frenchmen, Yankees, Germans, Italians, Spaniards, aye, even Japanese, who seem to take wonderfully to Scotland. The herrings, and the ham and eggs, the Finnan haddocks, and the mince collops, not to mention the Dundee marmalade and the scones, soon disappear rapidly, for in these smooth Scotch waters, with their long, river-like inland windings, the most inexperienced of sailors need not be afraid of sea-sickness. Unfortunately the decks are haunted with itinerant musicians, mostly pipers, who ought to be utilised down below for "forced draught" purposes, *i.e.*, blowing up the engine fires. At last, after a most pleasant sail, we are (a full boatful of passengers, but only two with myself bent on grouse) unshipped at a small Highland ferry, from which in the morning we will have to make our way as best we can to the Lodge, which the grouse agent says is conveniently situated to Mr. MacBrayne's steamboat route. "Convenient" in a grouse agent's list means "thereabouts." As the boat grates on the beach the landlord comes down rubbing his hands and escorts us up to his "web" of a hotel. A well-known tune is coming from the bar-room as we enter, and we are tempted into parodying Burns, for does it not say—

Southrons wha at Oban bled,
 Southrons wha on steamboats fed,
 Welcome here unto your bed,
 For you'll have to pay.
 Now's the day and now's the hour,
 Towerists, wha hae come to tower,
 Prices ye'll pay fower times fower,
 Ere ye gang your way.

But the strappin' lassie leaves the piano to supply our orders at the little bar, and her face, which is most pleasant, gives us encourage-

ment. We recollect, too, that it is at the great big hotels which are managed by boards of directors in Edinburgh that the prices are "piled up," and that in the little corner out-of-the-way-places folks are pretty safe, even when the rooms are nearly all taken up. Having secured our rooms, the next thing was to secure a trap, resolving to go no further that night. This we succeeded in doing, and then our mind was at rest. We found the landlord as good as his bill was light and lenient next morning. He had been a gamekeeper himself, and with what money he had amassed he had retired into the hotel, being a widower with an only daughter. He seemed only too glad to accept our invitation to join us in the smoking-room, where he told us all about the grouse moors in the neighbourhood and a hundred anecdotes, of old days on the heather. We might have sat with him till sunrise, but sleep was hanging heavily on our eyelids, and, bidding him good-night, we retired. The next morning, after breakfasting at eight o'clock, we saw the four-wheeled trap, which looked like something between a ferry-boat and gig, packed with gun-cases, cartridges, and baggage, and, taking our seats, were soon whirling out to the wee, lone lodge of Sheepfank, fifteen miles off. We were not in a hurry, having a day to spare, and so let the nag go easy up the hills. Early in the afternoon we were safely fixed for the night, and in the cool Highland eve unpacked our own guns outside at the doorway. One of our party tried the burn for trout, and raised as many as filled the frying-pan, over which presided the gamekeeper's wife, by no means a bad cook, as the old hotel-keeper had assured us, she having served with him for some years. Her husband was, so far as we could see, an experienced keeper, but rather too garrulous, and far too fond of telling, what in Lowland men would have been called, "whoppers," but which are dignified by Professor Blackie and others into simple Highland romances. He was a "second-sightist" of the highest degree, and could tell most wonderful stories about the Evil Eye and the fairies and the brownies.

"How is it, Duncan," said our irrepressible young wag, on his first northern expedition, on examining the dead vermin at the back of his own little lodge, "that you have got no dead water-kelpies? Surely they kill game?"

"Od, bless ye, sir," was his exclamation, "dinna say that, or

maybe it's in the little burn we'll baith be drooned thegither. Eh me, wha daur shoot a water-kelpie."

"And what for not, or a brownie either?"

"Od, for my sake dinna talk that way, sir. It's little ye ken the power they have. There was once——"

But here Duncan started on a brownie story, just as his wife announced that tea was waiting, and the savoury smell of the newly-fried trout drew us away.

Get early home, and don't sit late ;

Early up and then shoot straight

is our motto, though we don't believe in rushing as if the grouse were only on the ground for a forenoon. Next morning saw a merry breakfast party, and the "crack" going as merrily as a gun-lock ; and after just one little whiff we joined Duncan, who had with him a very fine pair of Gordon setters, also a wonderful old pointer that the last lessee had left him as a present. We were certainly not strong in dogs, but we were quite equal to the hill we were on. By this time the terrible thunderstorm of the Twelfth of August is an old story. For many years it will be remembered as that on which Lord Lauderdale was killed by lightning on his shooting pony ; when hailstones rattled down on the sportsmen, and hay-ricks all over the North were washed away by burn spates. How the atmosphere hung about like a blanket, only those who were in the North will recollect ; how the mountains seemed to bombard each other across the Highland lochs with flashes and sheets of forked lightning, only will they who were witnesses recollect. It was not till seven brace and a half had fallen to our guns that it rolled upward from the southward, and the first flash let us know what we might expect. The lodge was away down in the glen afar off, and, resolving to be as near as possible if the storm came nearer, we turned and shot towards it, the grouse seeming to sit closer under the gathering gloom. But as the reaper when lightning flashes feels afraid of his hook, so the sportsman feels somewhat afraid of his gun when the fire is literally spreading low on the heather like a sheet. The dogs, too, were not steady, and, feeling the coming "rain plump," we sought the edge of a small cliff on the face of a burn. There, while it flashed and roared, and rained till the warm heath steamed, we stretched with our backs close to the rocks, and the dogs at our feet, wishing we

were safe out of it and snug in the lodge parlour. To beguile the time, Duncan began to tell us stories about great thunderstorms and narrow escapes.

"Yess," said he, "I wass wance ferreting rabbits on a winter's day down in the glen there, and, eh, it did come in with a rattle. Well, all at once I sees something flash, and I felt something warm on my legs, but I paid no attention whateffer. Well, when I went home, Mary, that's my wife, says, 'Duncan, what in all the world heff you been doin' with your stockings?' 'Nothing whateffer,' says I. 'Well they're just singed right, down both sides useless,' says she, and so they wass, shust burnt off me with the lightning, which had gone through between my legs. But I knew of a more narrow escape than that."

"Oh, Duncan, Duncan, come now!" was the general exclamation.

"Oh, yess, I did; it was a heffier thunderstorm than this, too, and there wass a gentleman I was workin' the dogs to over at Fort William. It was years ago, and he was shootin' with an old mussel-loader which had a steel ramrod. He was an old Major of sojers, and cared for nothing. He had been under fire afore, he said, with something pehind it, too, and did not mind plank cartridges. Well, he had shust killed a white hare, and wass loadin' again, and got in the wad on his powther, and was ramming it down, when the lightning it catches on his steel ramrod——"

"And knocks him to pieces, Duncan, of course?"

"Nothing of the kind. It shust run down the barrel o' the gun, and went out at the nipple, making a hole at his foot, and purnin' all the powder with it."

"And was he not hurt, nor the gun damaged?"

"Not a bit, neither; and he killed 22½ brace of grouse that afternoon." An enormous peal of thunder burst overhead, and possibly this somehow frightened the story-teller, for he whispered in a pause in its rumbles, "It wass an old ten-bore gun, and worn wide at the nipple, maybe."

We had not exhausted Duncan's wild stories when the storm went off, but being drenched to the skin, having been forced from our shelter by the brown spate that came down the burn, we shot homewards, taking a slightly circuitous route. There

was little wind, however, to blow the mist, or rather steam, away, and our coveys invariably disappeared in directions unknown. The moss in places was sodden with moisture, and the peat-holes were filled with fresh rain-water, so that it was not comfortable at times to jump the hags. The Gordons ranged close and worked admirably, liking the moisture better than the dry electric heat, and under Duncan's directions we got some capital shooting on the "clumpy" heather along the slopes at the foot of the hill, our lost coveys in the mist having gone downward. Amongst some alders we came upon a covey of young black game, and though mistakes might have been made in the mist, we succeeded in leaving them alone. Some popping at rabbits in the kail-yard behind the lodge, and we went inside after securing 15½ brace, two hares, and three rabbits—quite content, and glad to get into dry clothes. In the evening we thoroughly enjoyed ourselves, having had wonderful brownie stories from the old keeper, who was quite an edition of fairy tales. Most of them he no doubt had originated himself, but had forgotten the source of their derivation, as most Scotchmen do. It was quite enough for us, however, that they were amusing. With a modest nightcap we wound up an early evening, determined, we said, to have bigger bags next day, and all singing—

Oh, happy the days we aye spend on the heather,
For sweet is the sight of the-grouse on the wing ;

No matter to us how wild be the weather,

For rain, wind, or hail we do not care a fling.

With our gun aye our dogs we will follow with gladness,

So long as we've strength and so long as we've health !

Leave sorrow to townsmen and cities to sadness,

But out on the moors, we'll aye be on the Twelfth.

Oh, prescribe will the doctors their pills and their potions,

Feel your pulse, and advise you at meals to take care ;

Of their drugs aye for me you may swallow whole oceans,

Prefer will I aye a tramp in fresh air.

For happy are we when the grouse wings are whirring,

And richest are we whose health is our wealth !

Then, so long as we live our legs we'll be stirring,

And knock down our birds aye on August the Twelfth.