

The Age of Trees.

"Well do I mind him: a fine man, but a bad baker. He just ruined himself with his fanciest, letting the bread spoil in the baking while he was 'takin' up w' some auld-wa' doctrine. There was a neighbour passed him one day howling and hammering in Gerston Quarry yonder. 'A fine day, Robert,' he cried. 'What are ye seeking there?' 'Fish,' quod Robert, and went on w' his work. 'Queer kind o' fish in a place like you,' said the other, and away he went down the road to Thurso, telling a' the folk that Robert Dick, the baxter, had gone clean demented, seeking fish w' a hammer in Gerston Quarry!"

I feel that it is idle to attempt Sandy's portraits divorced from the environment of that strange land of Caithness, whence winter, the season when I know it best, seems to banish not only all token but all promise of verdure. I shall not forget the last time I saw Sandy beside the river he knew so thoroughly and loved so well. It was in that rocky gorge, three or four miles below Loch Morse, where Thursa abandons its habitual sloth, dinging itself about among the rocks and churning out foam in reckless profusion.

I had arrived at a sheltered nook under a cliff crowned with a ruined keep, the name whereof I cannot recall, although, like every relic of the middle ages in this land, it has its record of midnight massacre, fire and rapine. Below the castle the river glides deep and dark between opposing cliffs, forming a fine salmon east, known as the Devil's Pool.

Sitting down to eat my luncheon, I bade Sandy take my rod and fish the east. A gleam of wintry sunshine lighted the weird scene, and, as I watched my gillie casting, I thought it would be hard to match such a fine type of manhood. His unconscious pose was so statuesque, his thigh boots set off his lengthy limbs so well, his action with the rod was so graceful, the brown boots and browner water threw his sunlit figure into such high and delicate relief, that the picture shines out clearer than most others in the dim gallery of the past. I could not help feeling a trifle envious of such a fine animal, so greatly my superior in stature, strength, and good looks.

As he fished, he repeatedly scratched his ear, which, when he came from the water, was bleeding a little. He thought it had been chapped by cold. Ah! little as either of us suspected it, the finger of death was there. When I returned a year later to the Thurso, Sandy Harper was my gillie no more. He was bedridden, smitten with cancer, and when I visited his humble dwelling, those once handsome features were swollen and distorted almost beyond recognition.

Only the perfect manners and good breeding of the man were unchanged. He wasted no time in complaint, and only spoke of his disease in reply to my inquiry, though it moved me almost to tears when he said simply: "I am sorry, Sir Herbert, when I think I shall never be on the river with you again." Then, although the swelling had almost closed his mouth, and it was evident that speaking caused him much pain, he began to discuss the prospects of the fishing season as keenly as if it were he, not I, that was concerned in it.

When I rose to leave, he asked a question entirely characteristic of his active intelligence—a question which, until the present time, has baffled all scientific research. "I want to ask you," said he, "you that understands these things, is this trouble of mine caused by a bacillus or not?"

There I left him in his lowly box-bed, my comrade in many a wild day's sport, and thence they carried him, a fortnight later, to lay beside his people in the lonely cemetery.

What a crowd of minor characters claim recognition as one reviews the past. There was old Tofts, head keeper to the Earl of Galloway, presiding over the hono beats of his master's princely domain. In physique, his only peculiarity was that his complexion seemed to be of parchment: come foul or fair, or rain or shine, it never lost its whitey-brown tint. Many a pretty day's sport have I had with him along the well-cleared shores of Wigton Bay, reminding me of the meeting of Mount Edgecumbe woods with the waters of Plymouth Sound.

Tofts' reputation, luckily, did not rest upon the quality of his dogs, which was indifferent; but he had a quaint, confidential way with them, which was sometimes amusing. Somebody having fired at a hare and imagined it wounded, called out for a dog. Tofts let go a gaunt, rusty-coated animal, which disappeared on the trail and was seen no

more for a while. We sat down to luncheon, and were half finished before the animal reappeared without the hare. On being asked whether he thought the dog had caught the hare and left it, Tofts bent down, seized his dog's muzzle, and smelt it. "No," said he, "I think he has not been in contact with it."

Then there was Alec Boyle—a robust, rather short, swarthy fellow, with a merry eye, a great enemy of mine in my school holidays, possessed of the only good retriever in the establishment presided over by John Pace. It was a creature of patchwork pedigree, fearfully and wonderfully made, bridled in unceremoniously with drab and black, but of intelligence almost human.

Alec's chief failing was of a convivial nature, which once afforded a parliamentary candidate a fine opportunity for a platform joke. The occasion was an election meeting in a moorland schoolhouse; to describe the night as unadvised would be to pay it an undeserved compliment. The wind raved and the rain poured: finding a weak place in the roof, a drip descended on Alec's curly black head. He shifted his place several times, till the candidate, interrupting his dissertation, observed: "That is the first time I have ever seen Mr. Boyle decline a drop!" a topical allusion which found instant appreciation among the audience.

Tom Hogg was another well-remembered worthy, now passed to his rest. A native of Ettrick, I believe, where others of his surname have left their mark, he is connected with some of my earliest and brightest recollections of shooting, for he had charge of some of the late Earl of Stair's fine moors on the Water of Luce. I shall be accused of prejudice, no doubt, if I express regret that such days as I have spent with Tom Hogg and his fine pointers may never be had again—if I state my conviction that no luncheon, however elaborate, can ever be so savory as the pocketful of provender which each man buckled up for himself at breakfast. For that was the rule or old in that most liberal establishment. No general luncheon was provided; paper and string were laid on the side table. Experienced guests had learned the prudence of making their provisions before eating a hearty breakfast: post-prandial appetite being an unsafe test of what might prove to be their requirements after noon.

It was under Tom Hogg's auspices that I first experienced the excitement of grouse-driving. It was a novelty in Scotland in those days; no regular hunts were provided for the shooters, who concealed themselves as best they might in peat hags, behind a convenient stone dyke, or by simply crouching in the heather. In such circumstances not only was the practice rather ineffective and uncertain, but there was considerable risk of accident owing to the imperfect "dressing" of the line of guns, their concealment from each other, and because we had not learned the obligation to take birds only coming or going, and not to follow them round.

The concern of a certain moment is still present to me, when, having fired at some birds crossing to the left, I heard a loud shout from an invisible neighbour: "He, he, there. Take care what you're doing. You've shot me!" Concern deepened into horror when, at the end of the drive, I found the said neighbour bleeding profusely, a white silk handkerchief and the whole front of a light-coloured jacket being deluged with gore, presenting a truly ghastly spectacle. He was a well-nourished gentleman of florid complexion, and it was a mighty relief to find that the whole of the mess came from the puncture of a single shot in his rosy cheek. Thank God it was not his eye, as it might have been; in which case I should not be recounting the incident with so much levity.

Tom Hogg was a typical south-country Scot, quietly observant and ready with dry comment. His vocabulary was occasionally ambiguous; as when he invited me one day to subscribe to an Aperient Society. Now, like every other M.P., I was inured to solicitation on behalf of every form of recreation and many kinds of enterprise; but the aim and organization of an Aperient Society baffled all conjecture. "That's surely a funny kind of society, Tom," said I; "how does it work?" "Oh, it's just a club o' bekeepers," he replied; "we're great at the honey hercaway, ye ken." I was enlightened at once, and willingly contributed my mite to the Aperiant Society.

Forty years ago, broad Scotland contained no more hospitable roof-tree than that of Dunragit—no more charming host than the gallant admiral who was laird

thereof. Visitors often came without notice, but never without a genuine welcome, sure of a full share of all that field or flood could provide. By ancient and picturesque tenure the whole right of salmon fishing in the Water of Buce and its tributaries was vested in the lairds of Dunragit, from source to mouth, and beyond the mouth as far as a man might cast a javelin, riding into the sea at low tide.

Those who can recall old times at Dunragit will not have forgotten the two Sandies—Sandy Weir and Sandy Cleavean, gamekeepers. I had most to do with the latter, whose somewhat sinister aspect belied his excellent qualities.

Sandy was not always communicative; but, when the spirit moved him, his narrative was graphic. I remarked to him one day that it was curious that the Luce, which looked like an ideal trout stream, should produce nothing but fingerlings.

"Ay, but there's big troots in the water," said he, "if a body had the skeell o' catchin' them."

"What makes you think so, Sandy?"

"Oh, I'm no' thinkin'; I ken it fine." Then, after a pause, "Ae day a gentleman from Manchester was fishin' troots about the Loups o' Killfeather, and he heukit a big yin. Awa' it went down the water wi' him, maybe twa mile, till he cam' down to the Bloody Well—that's where the railway bridge is, ye ken. I can' up wi' him there, and I seen the fish. Peace! but that was a material troot."

"Did he get him out?" I asked.

"No' him!" was the reply. "He was that spent, the body, wi' rinnin', that he could barely pit the ta' fut before the tither. Sae when the troot begoud to steer again, and was for aff down the water, he jist stood like a paralectick; and the troot smashed a' and awa'. We saw nae main o' him but the wau' o' a great tail as he gae' round the rocks that's there."

"How big was he, Sandy?"

"Dod, I ken no' hoo big he'd be; but this I ken finely—he was the biggest yellah troot that ever I seen."

"Are you sure it wasn't a red salmon?"

"Oh, salmon! Na, it wasna a salmon. A salmon never had spots on him the same as I seen on the side o' yon troot. They were as big as thae brannule leaves—pointing to some blackberry bushes by the wayside."

Another time we were discussing the undesirable presence of pike in some lochs, and their providential absence from others. Sandy spoke of pike in a certain loch which I was not aware contained them.

"But," said I, "there are no pike in Loch Malberry, are there?"

"Deed is there!" answered Sandy; and then, after one of his characteristic pauses, added, "Ae day I was gamin' along the side o' yon loch, an' I seen a thing in the water, I thoct it was a tree." Another pause. "An' then I saw twa e'en in it."

"And what was it, Sandy?" I asked breathlessly.

"Oh, it was a pike," he replied laconically.

"And what did you do, Sandy?" I persisted impatiently.

"I gaed back frae the loch for fear o' him!"

By this time Sandy had entered my own service as underkeeper, and I had become aware of an interesting fact about the name. He stood on the page-sheet as Alexander McLean, but, although Gaelic has not been spoken in Galloway for nearly four centuries, he was known to all men in ordinary life by the name of Sandy Cleavean, the familiar rendering of his patronymic being a survival of ancient Celtic usage.

Such are a few of the phantoms moving across the camera obscura of memory. Profriness is the sin that doth so easily beset old sportsmen; and I am conscious of having committed it; but perhaps it may be reckoned more venial when the motive is to pay kindly tribute to some of those who have contributed so much to bygone pleasures.

"There was a friend of mine round Inglewood," remarked the Taranaki man, "who once joyfully bought an oil expert, declaring that he had struck this fluid on his land. He brought a sample in a bottle. Now, evidently my friend had been in a great hurry, hastily grabbing the first bottle at hand, for when the chemist had duly analysed the sample submitted he sent the following telegraphic report: 'Find no trace of oil. You have struck pargeoric.'"

A correspondent of the "Times" has found a plane-tree on the island of Coa which, he suggests, may be 2400 years old at least, for there is a marble seat under it, and the inhabitants declare with one voice that this was used by Hippocrates. Another correspondent thinks the evidence insufficient. The oldest tree with which he himself is acquainted claims no more than 1100 years, and it cannot prove so much. Of course it cannot; there is no register of births and deaths for trees, and when some famous specimen falls, interested persons are apt to set a young one in its place and say nothing about it. After a certain time the innocent public accepts the substitute in good faith. But there is one case where the age alleged, 2151 years, or, by the latest correction, 2194 years, may also be accepted—it is a long way off, unfortunately. In 288 B.C., or 245 B.C., King Tissa begged a cutting of the Bo-tree at Anuradhapura, under which Buddha slept on a great occasion. No one dared to mutilate the venerable relic; but it settled the difficulty by casting a branch of its own accord into a golden jar. Prince Mahinda was going as a missionary to Ceylon, and he took the blessed sapling with him, under charge of his Royal sister. They "planted it out" at Anuradhapura, where the tourist may behold it flourishing, a mighty trunk, at the present day. But is it the real article? That the story is true nobody disputes, but in two thousand years half a dozen young Bo-trees have had time to grow mightily. The Chinese pilgrim, Fa Hien, describes the sacred object he saw in the fourth century, and more than one point he noted may be identified in the specimen existing. But they are not remarkable. Sir Emerson Tennant looked into the evidence, and he wrote: "Estimates of the age of other old trees in the world are matters of conjecture, which, however ingenious, must be purely inferential; whereas the age of this Bo-tree is a matter of record, its conservancy has been an object of solicitude to successive dynasties, and the story of its vicissitudes has been preserved in a series of continuous chronicles among the most authentic handed down to mankind. Its green old age would seem almost to verify the prophecy given when it was planted—that it would flourish and be green for ever." Science may be able to pronounce definitely before long.

A Bit of Strategy.

Trooper Brown had lately joined the Mounted Rifles, and was at his first camp. He had hired for the training a huge steed, which had probably once graced a local dray. But though not a beautiful animal, it was possessed of the wisdom of the serpent, for during a long and useless life it had learned that the best, easiest, and altogether most satisfactory way to get on in this life was to keep one's mouth shut. And as the mouth of the nag of Trooper Brown usually closed as tightly as a five-barred gate, with a double padlock, it was difficult, indeed—nay, impossible—to get the bit therein.

On the first morning parade the lieutenant rode down the lines of his company, and asked:

"All the men turned out, sergeant-major?"

"Yes, sir," said the sergeant-major. "All, except Trooper Brown. He's waiting for his horse to yawn, so he can slip the bit in, and the worst of it is, sir, the brute ain't a bit tired."

WHY WASTE YOUR MONEY.

If you have rheumatism, gout, or sciatica, it is useless to hope for a permanent cure from a liniment. You can expect, at the best, nothing but temporary relief. If you want to cure yourself you must deal with the cause which is uric acid in the system. Turpin's Rheumo achieves this object; it drives out the uric acid, and all rheumatic or sciatic pains at once cease. Mr W. Oakley, painter, New Brighton, writes:—"I was suffering from a severe attack of rheumatic gout, and got a bottle of Rheumo. After a few doses I was able to move myself, although before taking it I could not use a knife. I will never be without Rheumo for the future, and will gladly recommend it to my suffering friends. Sold everywhere, 2/6 and 4/6 per bottle."