

A FOX-HUNT IN THE HIGHLANDS.

THE spell of Arctic weather that came in April had many and varied results. To holiday-makers it brought disappointment and much enforced detention indoors, though at Rothiemurchus we had not a little compensation in the superb view of the north face of the Cairngorms, dressed all in their heavy winter coats; to shepherds it brought anxiety and severe labour among the newly-dropped lambs; to wild fowl and beasts it brought famine. Thus it came about that we had the unwonted spectacle of more than a dozen black-headed gulls squabbling over table-scrap within three yards of our dining-room window, and that the foxes got among the lambs and carried off at least one.

I had been out for a long day among the hills and glens, wading part of the time through deep snow slush, and had quite failed to discover any traces of the return of the Loch an Eilein ospreys. Perhaps they had known afar off of the unkindly weather, and delayed their return thus a month past their usual date; let us hope so. Anyway, as I trudged home in the gloaming I saw Keeper Cox in his garden, and stopped for a brief crack. He told me of the depredations of the foxes, and also that a hunt was arranged for the morrow, the rendezvous being Milton Bridge, at 6 in the morning, and the area to be drawn including Ord Ban and Kennapol, hills well-known to me, and separating Lochs an Eilein and Gamhna from the Spey. I asked leave to join the hunt, and was welcomed, as I should "make one more", and at the outside the force available would not exceed twenty men.

Accordingly, the next morning I was up at 5, my toilet and breakfast were less leisurely than usual, and I was soon speeding on my cycle through air that was keen with biting frost, and over roads that were iron-hard, and that in yesterday's muddy places gave me a shaking that

made it no easy matter to remain in the saddle and retain the pedals. At 6 I joined the company of fourteen men, five of them keepers, and the rest gillies and estate workers. I was the only outsider, and we had but two dogs, one of which shortly went off on some expedition of its own, and the other, though keeping with us, gave no voice all day. Of course, in a Highland fox-hunt there is none of the "pomp and circumstance" of fox-hunting as followed in "hunting" shires. We had no ladies and gentlemen on horseback, no gay coats and trim tailor-made habits, no pack of musical-voiced hounds. We were not out for amusement, but grimly intent on business. To us the foxes were vermin, and our object was to discover and exterminate them. Our drive was over two precipitous hills clothed with a dense growth of pine, juniper, and heather; and our day's work called for much physical exertion, and demanded no little agility, strength, skill, and care.

Standing chatting on the bridge was but cold work, with the thermometer somewhere considerably below 32° F., and we were not sorry when Keeper Cox gave us orders for the drive. Three guns were sent on along the road by the loch side, and were to station themselves in the boggy hollow on the south of Ord Ban. When we had given them sufficient start, we were scattered in a line along the north side of the hill, our instructions being to wait where we had been posted till a signal gun was fired, and then to make our way due south over the hill, each man going as straight forward as possible, and keeping within sound of the men nearest him. We were to make as much noise as we could by voice and stick, so as to alarm the foxes and drive them before us to where the guns were in waiting. It was a new experience to me to go over a hill in this noisy fashion, for I had always made it a rule to move about as quietly as possible so as not to alarm the wild creatures whose presence adds so much to the charm of a holiday in the hills. But, acting up to orders, I raised my voice in wild shouts, and quite spoiled my heavy oak stick by whacking it on rocks and tree trunks. It was

curious to hear the varied tones of voice as the men shouted. One or two had full musical voices, and gave vent to ringing, resonant tones; others had the curious high-pitched, slightly nasal quality of voice, common in the Highlands among Gaelic-speaking people, penetrating and carrying, but not full or rich; one man had a harsh, bleating voice, suggesting what that of a sheep might become if the animal were hoarse and angry—not a sound that a fox would find attractive. There was a buoyancy and excitement in springing lightfoot up a steep hillside in the early morning; the air was keen and fresh, the ground frost-bound under foot, the sun gradually dispersing the mist and revealing the great hills across the forest, robed in their unbroken cloaks of snow. Deer sprang away startled in front of us, crows rose with loud, startled cries, grouse and blackcock cluttered away, rabbits scuttled to their holes; on the top of the hill a hare sat up to investigate, and then bolted, and two sheep with their lambs that had strayed high up the hill were evidently much puzzled by the unwonted disturbance. As we cleared the north face of the hill, and began the descent on the south, it was necessary to get the men better into line, for the right wing, having the easier ground, had got rather ahead. This pause, I think, gave the fox his chance of escape, and he took it; for he probably nosed the watchers below, and worked his way to the extreme right of our line. When we came out of the dense woodland on the south of the hill, we learned that the westernmost beater had seen the fox run out beyond our line and double back towards the hill. If this man had brought his gun—as he should have done—Master Reynard would have met his deserts. As it was we lost him.

When we had joined our posted guns, we made a short halt, for the men who had made their way across the east face of Ord Ban had been hard-worked. Refreshments, bread, cheese, and whisky, were produced, but partaken of only sparingly, as much more work had yet to be done. It was then arranged to draw Kennapol, the hill next south from Ord Ban, a smaller hill, but steeper, and more densely

covered with rough juniper. The arrangements for the drive were much as before, the guns going ahead to the Inchriach, the wooded hollow beyond Loch Gamhna, on the south side of the hill. The signal gun having been fired, we started anew to make noises, and this time alarmed a herd of deer that had watched us with curiosity, and also raised an eagle that floated over our heads. We heard shots in front, and on coming down to the trysting-place learned that a fox had been driven down to the guns, but had in all probability escaped, as Mackenzie, the forest keeper, feared that both his shots had missed. Indeed, a fox fleeing for his life through the dense tangle of juniper and long heather would offer but a poor mark.

Then ensued some little discussion as to the use of any further driving. Some men had done enough hill-running, but all were disappointed at not getting a fox, and it was decided to draw Kennapol again, on the chance that the fox had been wounded. So the guns returned to their original station between the two hills, and, as the day had become bright and warm, it was a pleasure to lie on the hill-side and rest while we gave them the necessary start. Opposite to us was the west face of Creag Fhiaclach, which had so wofully suffered in the forest fire of 1899; the burnt timber has all been cleared off it, and it still presents a wide stretch of utter desolation, in which there is little of vegetation surviving except the mosses, which in places are very luxuriant and beautiful.

When time was up, we recrossed Kennapol, but without incident or result. Those of us who went near the summit were drawn aside to look at the inscribed memorial cairn which the Duke of Bedford erected to the memory of the Duchess, who was very fond of Kennapol and its surroundings. And, indeed, the spot is a choice one, and combines all the beauties characteristic of the Highlands—hill, glen, crag, cavern, loch, river, stretches of heather and juniper, and dense pine woods. Care was necessary in descending the north face of the hill, for the rocks were steep, wet, and slippery, and the patches of melting snow made the difficulty greater than usual. But we all got down without mishap, and without any further sight of the fox.

The day's work was now done; but the day's pleasure was by no means over. Our final halt was near the western corner of Loch an Eilein. Here we sat and lay under some of the fine old pine trees that still adorn the forest. Bread and cheese and whisky were again produced, and now met with ready acceptance. Story, chat, and laughter passed away the time. One, declining more bread and cheese, offered to take "plenty of whisky" instead; another told of the minister who, speaking warningly of whisky as "a nail in the coffin", was asked to drive another while the hammer was still in his hand. But the drinking was strictly confined to reasonable drams, and no one was the worse. Previous fox-hunts were recalled, the tricks of Reynard discussed, and arrangements proposed for another raid on a later day. Then the young folks had their reward for the day's exertions. The keepers served out a supply of shot cartridges, and the empty bottle was flung high as a moving target. Inexperienced shots, of course, missed it, but a tall, solemn-faced gillie smashed it at his first attempt. Empty cartridge cases were flung up, and a keeper showed that even so small an object could be struck at a fairly long range. One good man, possibly slightly elated by a dram, gaily flung up his cap for the neophytes to shoot at, and, luckily for him, they did not hit it. But all things come to an end, and, when the ammunition was expended, the merry party broke up, dispersing to their several homeward ways, the only regret being that our foxes had escaped.