

TIMBER FLOATING AT ROTHLEMURCHUS.

BY C. G. CASH, F.R.S.G.S.

READERS of "Memoirs of a Highland Lady" will remember with pleasure the animated account Mrs. Smith gives in her eleventh chapter of the varied proceedings connected with the forest industries in the early years of the nineteenth century—the felling, lopping, barking, driving, and floating. It could be truly said that then "the number of people employed in the forest was great. The logs prepared by the loppers had to be drawn by horses to the nearest water and then left in large quantities till the proper time for sending them down the streams. In order to have a run of water at command, the sources of the little rivers were managed artificially to suit floating purposes. Embankments were raised at the ends of the lakes in the far-away glens at the point where the different burnies issued from them. Strong sluice-gates, always kept closed, prevented the escape of any but a small rill of water, so that when a rush was wanted the supply was sure. The night before a run, the man in charge of that particular sluice set off up the hill, and reaching the spot long before daylight opened the heavy gates; out rushed the torrent, travelling so quickly as to reach the deposit of timber in time for the meeting of the woodmen, a perfect crowd, amongst whom it was one of our enjoyments to find ourselves early in the day. The duty of some was to roll the logs into the water. This was effected by the help of levers—like Harry Sandford's snowball, Johnnie screamed out the first time we took him with us. The next party shoved them off with long poles into the current, dashing in often up to the middle in water when any case of obstruction occurred. They were then taken in charge by the most picturesque group of all, the youngest and most active, each supplied with a *clip*, a very long pole, thin and flexible at one end,

generally a young, tall tree. A sharp hook was fixed to the bending point, and with this, skipping from rock to stump, over brooks and through briers, this agile band followed the log-laden current, ready to pounce on any stray, lumbering victim that was in any manner checked in its progress. There was something graceful in the action of throwing forth the stout yet yielding clip, an exciting satisfaction as the sharp hook fixed the obstreperous log. The many light forms springing about among the trees, along banks that were sometimes high and always rocky, the shouts, the laughter, the Gaelic exclamations, and, above all, the roar of the water, made the whole scene one of the most inspiring that either actors or spectators could be engaged in. There were many laughable accidents during the merry hours of the floating; clips would sometimes fail to hit the mark, when the overbalanced clipper would fall headlong into the water. A slippery log escaping would cause a tumble, shouts of laughter always greeting the dripping victims, who good-humouredly joined in the mirth. As for the wetting, it seemed in no way to incommode them; they were really like water-rats".

For many years preceding the Rothiemurchus Forest fire of 1899 there had been a cessation of these interesting and picturesque scenes; indeed the forest needed a rest, during which trees might attain a size fitting them for cutting. But the fire made it necessary to clear away many trees that had been killed on the slopes overlooking the south-east of Loch an Eilein, and each year since cutting has been going on. A sawmill was started at the outflow of Loch an Eilein, and the mills at Inverdrue were kept busy. This season a mill has been established on the Glen Eunach road, just north of the forest march, and a small tramway has been laid on the acclivity from Cross Roads.

Some three hundred trees had been cut down during the past season along the course of the Luineag, the stream flowing from Loch Morlich. My wife and I happened to be at Aviemore when the logs were to be

floated down to the Inverdrueie sawmills. Accordingly we went up to Coylum Bridge to see what could be seen. The day, though dull and drizzly at sunrise, turned brilliantly fine and warm, and we saw two swans flying up Spey, their long necks outstretched. The hills were beautifully clear and shining in their spring coats of snow. Every cairn could be plainly seen, except the two on Braeriach, which are small and were apparently snowed up.

When we reached Coylum Bridge we followed the side of the stream to choose a place for the view. After trying several spots we decided that the best one was at the little wooden foot-bridge at the small fall, the Coyleum, that gives name to the hamlet. This is a few hundred yards above the stone bridge. Here we commanded a good view up the stream, and could watch the logs and the floaters at advantage. Soon we saw that the sluices of Loch Morlich had been opened, as the water flowed more abundantly, and then the logs began to make their appearance. Some floated end on, dipping gracefully as they came; others rolled crosswise, and bumped and splashed clumsily and heavily. At a shallow some of these caught and stuck, others drove against them, and soon there was a "jam" of a dozen or so logs. Along came a "floater" carrying his clip. He took stock of the "jam", waded into the water, which must have been very cold, and soon released some of the logs. The labour was obviously heavy, and no one could long remain in the cold, quickly-running stream to work at it.

While we sat on the little foot-bridge on the rocks close by it, we were told the story of the last recorded appearance of a fairy in Rothiemurchus—for it should be known that fairies and bogles of varied type used to frequent these parts in by-gone days; and if they are not now seen, it is plainly hinted by some of the older people that the reason is to be sought rather in the blindness and scepticism of modern people than in the absence of the "little folk". Fairy pools and fairy hillocks still exist, and we have seen at least one fairy dart, which we readily mistook for a flint arrow-head! But to our story.

“Once upon a time”—we did not get any very exact date—a woman was crossing the Luineag at the spot where we were. The river had then no bridge across it; at low water it was crossed by leaping. The woman was carrying her baby, bound in a plaid, on her back, and as she leapt, the child slipped out of the plaid, fell into the water, was swept over the fall, and disappeared. The poor mother, turning swiftly round to the stream as she reached the farther side, saw, standing on the side she had just left, an old man, who was not there when she leapt. This was a fairy “bodach”, and he told her that if she would at once return home she would find her child there safe and sound. Of course, the woman obeyed, and, equally of course, her child was found at home safe and sound.

With such story and gossip we filled up the intervals between the exciting moments when the big logs were swept down to the fall and plunged with sullen bump into the pool below, thereafter nodding their way down stream. Following them to the stone bridge, we had there a continuation of the view, and with a rough tree-branch shoved off some logs that got stranded. Just below the stone bridge is a deepish pool, and not a few logs spent a considerable time slowly circling round it.

The next day it was expected that the logs would all be got down to Inverdrue, so we took good care to be early at the back of the Free Kirk. The day was again brilliantly fine and warm, and a pleasanter way of spending a holiday forenoon need not be wished for. The logs were coming down at a great pace; the school children were lined up on the bank behind the school, all eager with their exclamations and cries as the logs raced by or stuck on the gravel banks. They showed their desire to help by throwing stones at the racing logs, till it was pointed out to them that they would damage the artificial embankment, and thereafter they had to limit their demonstrations to shouts and cheers.

Just below the Dell Bridge some men were stationed to guide the logs into the mill lade, and from them I

borrowed a clip. This is a twelve-foot pole, armed at one end with a steel spike and hook, the spike for shoving and the hook for dragging the logs. There was a considerable "jam" of logs on the gravel banks just behind the Free Kirk, and when a "floater" came to break it up I put in some work in dragging the released logs past the back of the schoolhouse and the smithy, and seeing them fairly on their way again. My wife had the "honour" of the first log, but the work is too heavy for a woman's hands and muscles, and, having opened the proceedings, she was content to let me do the work while she "superintended". And, indeed, the work affords good, hard exercise, bringing into play all the muscles of the body in the many postures assumed and the strenuous exertion called for. The only real drawback I felt was that, having no waders, I could not go into the stream, but was confined to the bank. Of course the "floaters" were up to their waists in the water much of the time, but "no me".

That afternoon saw the end of the task, all the logs being in the dock at Inverdrue, and the "ploy" was over. In the old days the proceedings ended with a "floaters' ball", which was the great event of the season. But in these days, when, alas, so much of the picturesque has passed out of life, there is no ball. Still, to the holiday onlooker, the "floating" presents pictures of an interesting and picturesque kind, and we are glad to have added them to our many pleasant recollections of Rothiemurchus.