

OUR LADY OF THE GORGE

THE majority of our fellow-guests at the inn were preparing for bed, although the night seemed young enough as the departing light of eventide reluctantly receded at the illuminating command of the bright moon in the glory of its fullness. It was within the hour of a summer midnight in the Highlands of Scotland.

Ronald was busy with his fishing gear spread along the terraced wall in front of the inn, whilst I tinkered with a perversely obstinate outboard motor which a fellow-guest had left behind for our pleasure and recreation. Our objective was a creel of fresh run sea-trout, possibly a fish, too, out of the estuarian waters of a mountain river which tumbled recklessly into the tidal brine at the head of Loch Beag, a mile-long extension of the greater Loch Glencoul. A cluster of small rocky islets enforced a narrow channel between the two lochs. The estuary of the river is some four miles distant by water from the Kylesku Ferry and the ancient inn beside it.

It was approaching the witching hour ere I got the engine spluttering sufficiently to show some promise of practical service, and with our gear aboard we took the chance as we commenced to 'chug-chug' our course to the lonely and romantic rendezvous with the silver Princess of Piscary. She behaved commendably well until we approached the island studded narrows, with Eilean an Tuim singled out on our starboard, when the old engine ceased to function and we were obliged to row the remaining mile, this being the whole length of Loch Beag.



PLATE XIII

HIGHLAND LAIRDS OF PISCARY

Such creels of bonnie sea trout are available in several of the estuarian waters of the west coast of Sutherland and Wester Ross, when time and tide; the place and the fly; the luck of the run, are all given the necessary consideration. The best sea trout in this creel is $6\frac{1}{2}$ lb. The aggregate to two fly rods is $55\frac{1}{2}$ lb. Mainly victims of the alluring 'Shaggy Whaup'.

There is something eerie and indescribably fascinating about the experience of rowing a 'wee boatie' on a large and lonely Highland loch through the silence of a moonlight night. The giant peaks of Quinag, Glas Bheinn, Ben More Assynt, and Beinn Leoid towered around us like ghostly, but purposeful sentinels guarding a priceless kingdom.

I think one becomes overawed with a feeling of being transported into the environs of an ancient world towards which one feels a natural affinity. We certainly felt completely segregated from the modern world, and our brief departure from it was sufficiently enthralling to make us wish this might be permanently achieved. Even the faintest whisper was magnified and weirdly re-echoed, as though our uttered thoughts had been assimilated and duly returned to us by the ghosts of our ancient forbears.

Rowing abreast of the starboard islands, we disturbed a flight of slumbering cormorants, and the hard, sepulchral croak of these unseen birds sounded weird and demoniacal. The seagulls took up the alarm with a clamour of screeching protestations against such an untimely invasion upon their nocturnal territory, as they wheeled and swooped around the boat. Some oyster catchers joined in with their unmistakable 'peet-peet', and the curlew added its plaintive note, the lapwing its shrill whistle. The weirdest of all was a school of porpoises which seemed intent on escorting us at very close range to the scene of our adventure. All fears amongst our feathered friends were allayed after we passed the island and the deep silence prevailed once more.

We beached the boat and took opposite banks for the fishing. Within half an hour the tide would be turning, and conditions in all respects were ideal to do battle with a shoal of bonnie sea-trout that glittered like the silver darlings they were in the moon's beam. They were just

asking for trouble as they lunged voraciously at almost every fly presented to them. For an hour or so the scene was almost suicidal as every other cast brought a frantic victim into the landing net. Then they began to take short, and finally to disregard our offerings with impunity.

Gathering the spoils of a grand hour's sport we joined up and made for the boat, which had for most of the time been unsighted behind a small headland. To our astonishment we found it completely submerged in some two fathoms of crystal clear water. It was held down by the weight of the engine astern, and the mooring stone to which it had been secured on the bow. There had been a slight error of judgment when beaching that boat!

There was nothing for it but to tread the heather and bog-myrtle, so, dividing the burden of piscary between us, we commenced the steep ascent beside the guiding burn to a height of fifteen hundred feet before striking a known track passing the north bank of Loch Bealach a' Bhuirich, a good mile distant from the estuary. We were thankful for the downward grade of this track which led us for another mile to the head of Loch Gainmhich, the eastern bank of which we adhered to, guided by the roar of the waterfalls at its northern extremity. Disturbed curlews and peewits were crying alarmingly above us, and the deer and sheep could be heard moving under cover like unseen ghosts. Had we not been nerved by experience, we might have been driven crazy with expectations of these unseen spectres waiting to pounce upon us.

We rested for a smoke on the edge of a ninety-foot precipice overlooking a deep, narrow gorge, the cradle of the Unapool Burn, and into which the effluence of the loch water hurled itself. The calmer breeze of the evening had whipped itself up into a strong wind, a wind that had a weird music in it, and from the shelter of one of a score of pinnacles that looked like an assembly of disgarded

church steeples, we listened as though to a super organist depressing every key on a super organ at once, and with great emphasis on the higher octaves. The tremulous base of the roaring falls joined in the accompaniment, making of the whole a mystifying discordance, weird and unnatural to the human ear. The moonlight beamed on the long, grey, ninety-foot tail flowing so gracefully down the face of the cliff and into the chasm below, itself a magnetic attraction one felt reluctant to leave.

Leave we did, however, but on a route dictated by an unfortunate circumstance. Ronald rummaging through his rucksack for a tin containing some matches, our petrol lighters proving useless in the wind, had the misfortune to see his reel fall out and roll over the edge of the precipice. Fortunately, it was encased in leather. The reel had to be salvaged, so, shouldering our burdens again, we sought out a place of descent conducive to our arrival at the base of the gorge in one piece, and by slithering, clinging to precarious ledges, tufts of heather and grasses, as for dear life, we managed to do so.

Things began to look different, and to feel different down below. Wisps of clouds crossing the face of the moon cast spectral shadows around the gorge, and up the rock-faced cliffs to a culmination of the church-like steeples which now formed themselves into a most fantastic and ghoulish community of grotesque-looking gargoyles, each one screaming, wailing, and howling, according to the part dictated by the wind passing through and amongst them. There was no wind at the bottom of the gorge other than that which was fast rising within ourselves, a fact which determined our decision to depart, deferring the search for the reel until another day.

Proceeding cautiously over rough ground beside and through the water, we aimed at reaching the road bridge which spanned it a quarter of a mile down-stream.

Hitherto, neither of us had noticed anything unusual about the waterfalls until I slipped on a loose stone. Ronald in the lead, looked back to see if I was all right, and it so happened that I was, until my gaze fell upon the petrified figure of my friend whose face was a sickly greyish hue in the pale beams of the moonlight. His eyes were like a pair of large, glassy, master marbles.

'What ails you, Ronald?' I enquired apprehensively.

For a moment he could not speak, and when I shook him, he commenced to stutter incoherently.

'Look behind you if you dare', he muttered.

I did dare, and the spectacle which confronted me almost brought me to my knees with fright, as I gazed upon the most astounding apparition of a woman that I ever wish to see in such circumstances. Such an amazing phenomenon, coupled with the weird incantations of the wind emanating from the direction of those ghoulis figures above us, was something that words in any language could never explain.

Interminably, so it seemed, we gazed upon the figure of the woman standing perfectly still beneath the falling water. Gradually the spectre lost the demoniacal character impressed upon us at first sight, as slowly it evolved itself in the form of a harmless peasant woman with head bowed in grief and sorrow. We were no longer afraid in her presence despite the fact that the apparition was of an unearthly nature, and contrary to the laws of Christian beliefs. Nevertheless, the moving shadows in the dancing moonbeams, coupled with the weird noises made by the winds above added considerably to the eeriness of our position, and we decided that it would be better to leave as soon as we could, and felt relieved when we reached the bridge and the road.

The three miles traversed over the hill from Loch Beag had been heavy going in the semi-darkness, and this at the



PLATE XIV

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When you examine this picture closely it will be observed that the 'lady' is by no means alone in this spooky glen. Note her stalker-capped and bearded companion on the left of the falls. These are truly disconcerting spectacles when the moon spots them like a searchlight in the eerie stillness before the dawn.

conclusion of an active twenty-hour day. With our hearts well placed in a rhythmic stride the remaining three miles along the downhill road were soon covered, and with our catches deposited in a basket in ice-cold water beside the inn, we were soon slumbering at the dawning of a new day.

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With the wings of holiday time always speeding at such high velocity in these enchanting Highlands, I always begrudge every minute used up in rest and sleep as the laws of Nature dictate. There seems such an infinity of places to explore and things to do in them, and all time seems never long enough.

Despite the fact that we were not long bedded, Ronald and myself were amongst the first arrivals in the breakfast room. It was such a beautiful morning, too, and having made arrangements to salvage the boat, we proceeded on our way to the gorge, and to search for the lost reel. Its location presented no difficulty and we almost walked up to it.

In the bright sunlight the spectral pinnacles of the earlier hours looked normal enough, and with the winds abated they were rendered mute. But the figure of the sad lady beneath the waterfalls remained as clearly defined in form as when we saw her bathed in the eerie light of the moonbeams. The lens of my camera has done its best to portray something of our vision to you, yet we know that the picture conveys nothing of the spectral atmosphere which pervaded the scene of our earlier visit.

The figure is, of course, a natural statue, carved into this phenomenal shape by the agencies of time and water. The vision of the perfect form as we saw it both by moon and sunlight, is governed entirely by the volume of water flowing over it. I have seen it completely hidden behind

the falls. Nevertheless, Ronald and I still felt that there was something far more than nature's artistic handiwork behind the apparition we confronted in that gorge, but that is a thought that need concern no one but ourselves.

There are scores of the most astounding examples of such phenomenal and artistic carvings in my mind's eye, but nothing ever impressed me as this statue to the 'Wailing Widow' most certainly did.

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This narrative might never have been written had it not been for an overheard reference to a 'Wailing Widow's Glen' in the vicinity of Kylesku. Thinking at the time, that the description might be associated with our 'Lady of the Gorge', I ventured an enquiry into the location and origin of this unusually named glen.

My informant, also on an angling holiday, had long been exiled in foreign lands from his native Sutherland, and it was he who narrated the ancient legend, often told by his forbears, who associated this amazing statue with its tragic construction.

It appears that some centuries past, a widow with her only son occupied the lone ferryman's house which stood where the old Kylesku Inn stands today. They survived mainly by their hunting instincts which always assured them a bird or a fish for the pot. The meagre pittance received for ferrying passengers and cattle across the narrows of Loch Cairnbawn to Kylestrome and back was far from sufficient to maintain them.

One day, however, the hapless youth was gored to death by a vicious stag and finally tossed over the precipice into the gorge below. That same evening the distracted mother found her missing son at the foot of the falls, and as she knelt beside his mangled body her grief



PLATE XV

THE KYLESKU FERRY INN

A lone ferryman's cottage has been in existence at Kylesku for centuries prior to the building of the present inn. The first licence was granted in 1680. The darker building on the left was an 1870 erection. The original inn is the white centre section. The smaller building on the right, now the most unique little fortress of a bar with rampant walls, has long been occupied by generations of hardy ferrymen before the inn was erected beside it. They were there when the Vikings came up the loch. My earliest recollections of a licensee is that of Colin Mackenzie in 1899. John and Margaret Moffatt have long since upheld its coveted reputation as a secluded angler's haunt. A free motor ferry conveys cars across the kyle to the Scourie road.

knew no bounds. A terrific storm broke loose amongst the surrounding hills as though intent on rendering each one asunder. The rock-faced precipice over which the infuriated waters roared, subsided under the impact, the falling debris burying the distracted woman beside her son. The agencies of time and water have carried away the debris, but the monumental structure remains to commemorate the tragedy.