

HIGHLAND SPORTS AND PASTIMES.



"TOSSING THE CABER."

SPLENDID scenery, novel trials of skill and strength, the picturesque garb of the combatants, and the strange tongue in which the onlookers give vent to their mirth or satisfaction at defeat or failure, combine to render a Celtic gathering unique to the Anglo-Saxon. South of the Tweed we are all familiar with the appearance of an enclosure where athletic sports are carried on. It is generally a large flat meadow, surrounded by a high stone wall or wooden fence, within which is a second enclosure, with ranges of seats conveniently set for the spectators. These sporting quarters being generally in the vicinity of large towns, the *habitués* are anything but gratifying specimens of the populace; and, except in inter-university or public school contests, they assemble rather to bet on favourite athletes than to enjoy muscular exercises. Except the bits of silk wound round the loins of the various personages who take an active part in the programme, there is rarely a bit of colour to be seen; and the whole affair being conducted with the regularity of long use, what is meant to be an out-of-door gala descends to the baldest commonplace, and results in the utmost weariness to those who know neither the heat of partisanship nor the unhealthy excitement of money hanging in the balance. Nay, the athletes themselves go through the programme with the *sang-froid* of the circus acrobat instead of the spontaneous joy of the true athlete, who finds a warrior's glow in friendly rivalry. A real Highland gathering—of which there are scores every year, in the quiet glens of the west and north of Scotland—is a very different affair from these cut-and-dried physical contests; and if the music of the bagpipes is less artistic than the

strains of the German band or body of hired instrumentalists, everything else is much more healthy and enjoyable. Everything else? Were we not safely ensconced in our study, within sound of Bow bells, it would be dangerous to speak disrespectfully of the music of the piper!

Let us try to depict the scene of a Celtic gathering. Behind us, towering into the cloudless blue, are the western spurs of the Grampians, heather-clad, hoary, and magnificent; out to the left, over cultivated undulating ground, we catch a glimpse of the green Atlantic, and hear its ancient waves crashing on the unseen beach; away to the north are purple hills, and, where they dip down into broad vales, a loch lies shining in the sun, with the blue Paps of Jura or the headland of some western isle in the far, dim distance; on our right is a broad shady gorge, or pass, where the dark Scotch fir is set off by the light and graceful form and foliage of the silver birch; and as the tartan-clad villagers, headed by the laird's piper, come in all directions to the grass-grown and mossy rendezvous, the gentle deer, silver-tailed rabbit, or gorgeous moor-fowl flee from the unwonted concourse. Here, surmounted by a heathery knoll, there is a natural amphitheatre, carpeted with Nature's own velvet, and in every face joy sits enthroned, while in the variety of colour in the tartans, the glow of health in the ruddy cheeks and sturdy limbs of the "lasses"—half hid, half shown, with modest unconsciousness—there is endless delight for the eye and charm for the heart. And now, after the long morning walk over the hills and moors, the inner man cries out for sustenance. Baskets are opened by knots of merry *convives*, who eat and laugh as only those can who live in free ozone. All the while the assembled pipers make the hills ring with the "Cock o' the North" or some equally heart-stirring march; and the ample but modest repast having been washed down by draughts of sparkling water from the brook that brawls over its stony bed a couple of hundred yards away, the real business of the day begins.

Naturally enough, there are contests in the Highlands common to athletic meetings in all countries, such as running, leaping, and wrestling, and these may be dismissed in a very few words. Premising that in these and other conflicts of skill and muscle the Celt would disdain to swathe his limbs and body in the white cotton affected by his brethren in the south, but simply doffs his plaid and jacket, the reader may be left to fancy how these stout Norsemen acquit themselves in the race, the leap, and the friendly fall. The course for races is no smooth, well-beaten track, but the runners, starting from a given point, make straight ahead, regardless of the unevenness of the ground, to a post set at some distance from the point of departure, round which all the rivals turn, and so home again. In wrestling the Highlander may trust more to his strength than his science; but, although ignorant of the mysteries of "back-heel," "outside



WRESTLING.

click," "cross-buttock," "hipe," and "twisting off the breast," he yet tugs strenuously at his man, and the Highlander "sent to grass"—to use a sporting phrase—takes his fall in the best of humours. There is an old-fashioned game which properly comes within the class "leaping," now all but obsolete in our highly tame and artistic meetings in England, to which the Highlander clings with all the tenacity of a hereditary Conservative—the hop, step, and jump. It may be less scientific than vaulting between two upright posts by aid of a long pole, but the long-shanked gillie and the shepherd, used to leaping mountain chasms in search of game or the lost of his flock, doubtless find



"PUTTING THE STONE."

it a good thing to retain this ancient article in their athletic programme; and some that we have seen cover enormous distances on the springy turf.

Highland athletics, however, have one or two distinctive features which will require rather more minute explanation. Not the least of these is the behaviour of the spectators. Away among the hills men are almost ignorant of the blue-coated guardian created by Sir Robert Peel: entirely so, unless they have visited the lowland cities or some of their own towns. Habituated to self-rule, they need no rosetted officials to keep a clear course or preserve a fair field. The "lasses" are generally seated in front, or lie gracefully recumbent on the turf, with their "joes" close behind them, while the aged are always accorded a favoured coign of vantage. Consequently, there are no cries of "Stand back!" or its equivalent in Gaelic: not be-



"THROWING THE HAMMER."

cause there is lack of excitement, for your natural Celt, like his Irish brother, is mercurial to a degree, as any one who has ever been present at these meetings can testify. Eye, tongue, hand, and foot are all on the move during the progress of a race or a wrestling bout—and the tongue especially, as it runs off with astonishing rapidity its hoarse gutturals and puzzles of pronunciation. Not unfrequently they demur to the ruling of the judges in the most direct manner, and might kick over the traces altogether, were it not for the ladies, or their own deep sense of the honour due to the "chieftain" judges, though they be heads of clans against which their fathers from time immemorial waged deadly feud. On the whole, however, a Highland audience is eminently good-humoured and law-abiding. Then there are sometimes clouds of discontent upon the faces of the competitors themselves, if only for a moment, as there are gusts of mist that temporarily make the hills

blurred and angry-looking, but this proceeds not so much from anger as from the intensesness of their striving, and their honest dislike to acknowledge themselves beaten. But it is in the various contests themselves that the Highland sports stand out from all others in Western Europe, and the origin of these it would be impossible to trace. They seem indigenous to the soil, and can only be properly appreciated when enacted amid their native surroundings.

"Tossing the Caber" is essentially a Highland game. The "caber" is simply the trunk of a young pine hewn from its roots near the scene of the contest, denuded of its branches, and varying in length according to its thickness, but never less than about ten feet long, and rarely more than fourteen. To toss this huge and unwieldy pole the athlete takes hold of the smaller end, poises it skilfully against his breast and shoulder in an upright position, and suddenly raising the thin end by sheer force to a level with the shoulder, throws it from him, so that the thick end touches the ground and the pine trunk falls away from him. If the end that has been elevated in the air is not thrown far enough away, the thin end comes back towards the thrower; or if the tree has not been skilfully manipulated, it falls at right angles to the direction in which it has been tossed, and in either case there would be

loud cries of "No throw!" from the excited on-lookers. Very often a caber longer and heavier than any of the aspirants to fame can deal with is chosen, and gradually shortened to suit the skill and strength of the competitors. Mistakes of manipulation are easy, and fun-inspiring. If, while poising the timber, the thrower is unable to keep the balance true, and his own centre of gravity at the same time, the caber slips gracefully over his shoulder or flies off in front of him, dragging him ignominiously along in its erratic career. While balancing, he has to stoop so as to make himself master of his huge burden, and when it goes he is obliged to follow. But when a master of the craft takes the caber in hand, poises it gracefully, runs quickly over the turf to get the proper momentum, and raises it and himself to his full height at the moment he throws it from him, to watch it, a second after, fall prone in the right direction, there is a universal shout of applause, and a look of conscious pride in the face of the chief actor. It often happens

that only two or three out of a large "entry," as we would say in England, succeed in tossing it at all, and then a heavier one or a longer one has to be cut to settle the "tie."

Another purely Highland pastime is "Throwing the Hammer." The hammer is not an ordinary tool by any means, but huge, heavy, and primitive enough to have been cast in the mould used for making that of Thor, and fitter for splitting rocks than driving the biggest nails. The hammer-head weighs usually from fourteen to twenty-one pounds, and has a "haft" of three feet or so. Taking this with both hands, as close as possible to the end of the handle, the Highlander swings it round his head three or four times and throws it from him. It is no unusual thing to see a throw of from sixty to eighty feet, or even more,

according to the weight of metal to be forced through the air. Here each competitor has his own favourite attitude and his own manner of getting the requisite momentum. Some face the mark, some turn their backs upon it, some stand sideways at it; and before throwing one swings the hammer round his head, another gives it a pendulum-like motion, and a third makes it describe a circle in front of him; but the result is always the same—the huge metal head, followed by the "haft," like a comet and its tail, describes a graceful curve in the air,



THE "SWORD DANCE."

and falls with a dull thud in the grass twenty or thirty yards from the mark. Closely allied to this is "Putting the Stone." In this trial of strength a large boulder is poised in the palm of the right hand, the arm being bent in the form of a V. The initial force is a combination of the muscles of the arm, helped by a swaying motion of the body upon one leg, and, although it is not possible to throw a stone twenty or thirty pounds weight so far as the hammer, it is surprising how practice enables men to overcome the inertia of a piece of rock. In this, as well as the previous contest, the winner is he who gets the stone or the hammer farthest from the mark. Two or three throws each, according to agreement, are allowed, and it very rarely happens that two men throw exactly the same distance. In the south a measuring tape is used to determine the distance, but in the Highlands a piece of twine, or even a thread of home-spun wool, answers equally well, measurement in the mind of the Celt being subordinated to distance in gross.

"Pipe Contests" are also intensely Highland, and naturally provoke no little enthusiasm among players and listeners alike—among players because they know all the mysteries of the art, and among listeners because they are more or less interested in the individual players. A Highland gentleman would as soon think of going to dinner without his kilt as eating it without the accompaniment of his "own piper." Every chief has his hereditary piper, and even Her Gracious Majesty and the Prince of Wales have been obliged to accustom themselves to the "chanter" when they spend their autumn on Deeside. And the piper is a "personage" in the Celtic household neither to be lightly treated nor to be spoken to without due formality; but he is nothing away from his native hills or the ancient clan homestead. Heard in the streets of the metropolis, the pipes are only a wild, unmeaning mixture of shriek and groan to English ears; but were the sounding-board formed by granite cliffs, or the sound is borne on the wind down some wild pass, they are in consonance with nature. The Highlander, so to speak, is born, married, and buried to the sound of the pipes. They are associated with his highest sorrows, his deepest griefs, and his bravest deeds. The tunes are histories in brief to the cultivated ear, telling as they do of wild clan warfare, or on the distant battle-field nerving his heart to demean himself worthily of the renown of his name. How the pipes weep in the coronach, thunder in the march, lilt in the strathspey, croon in the legendary air, or shout for joy at the wedding feast, only the true Highlander knows. Every Celt knows something of the Highland instrument *par excellence*, most of them play it, so that a pipe contest interests all. The intricacies of fingering, especially with "the lower hand," the true balance of all the "chanters," the bearing of the man as he steps to his tune, and the furniture of the instrument

itself, are all elements to be taken into consideration by the judges, as well as the choice of tune, the light and shade in expression, and the quality of the sounds emitted. That there are pathos, humour, and music in the Highland tunes such a master of the craft as Mendelssohn knows, and has shown; but the real judge of pipe-playing is a first-rate player. Nothing is more keenly contested at a Highland gathering than this, nothing creates more enthusiasm, and no one is more honoured than he who has been adjudicated winner.

There are other minor and less frequent sports and games which need not be particularised here, but one or two may be mentioned. For instance, all readers are sufficiently acquainted with the "Reel," "Sword Dance," and "Highland Fling;" and we shall, therefore, forbear describing them. Often at the close of the day's sports there is a general muster of competitors, in order that the best-dressed man may be rewarded. Occasionally we have seen the dogs admitted to trials of skill, batches of sheep being left in charge of lads some distance from the meeting-place, the "collies" sent in search of them, and the first to bring its flock in having a collar bound round its throat. But from first to last in such a gathering everything is thorough, good-humoured, and the rivalry frank and honourable.

One word must be said about the prizes. There are not, as in more scientific contests, silver flagons, cups, belts, or medals. Rarely are jewels or merely ornamental articles given; a plaid for the gillie's wife, a piece of tartan to make a kilt for the boys or a petticoat for the girls, a new crook for the shepherd, a bag of flour, a piece of meat, some crockery, or a useful tea-service in common metal, or a few shillings in a piece of paper towards paying the rent at Candlemas, being some of the favourite honours to be striven for.

W. GIBSON.



READING AT THE BRITISH MUSEUM.



O a person of literary tastes, one of the most interesting departments in our great national Museum is the reading-room. Visitors are not allowed to enter the vast hall dedicated to study and research, but they may stand at the entrance and survey the scene. Accordingly, not an hour passes, especially in the summer months, without numbers of sight-seers assembling behind the plate-glass screen which fronts the readers' entrance, in order to get a peep into this sanctum of literature, where some proportion of the literary work of London is done from day to day.

American ladies are great readers of good English authors, and therefore it is not surprising to find that they are frequent spectators of the still interior of this immense library. Perhaps they come in the secret hope of getting a glimpse at the snowy head of Carlyle, the dark tangled locks of Tennyson, or the pale intellectual face of George Eliot. If such be their aim, they will ordinarily be disappointed; for, although occasionally these master spirits do pay a flying visit to the reading-room on some exceptional quest or other, their calls are very few and far between. Every day, however, the Museum is filled with busy workers in the field of literature, science, and art. These are of both sexes, young as well as old, and