THE QUEEN AT HOME.

The fact that our Sovereign is what her people understand as a homely woman has in no small measure contributed to her well-deserved popularity. It was the Times which once said that the English people were a nation who found their pleasures chiefly at their own fashions. When the present Queen came to the throne, the time was, in more respects than one, the opening of a new era. The old order of things, which had held on from the eighteenth century, was passing away, and all at once, as it were, the people were charmed when the royal palace became a pattern home. Though George III. and Queen Charlotte had been worthy characters, the English Court had generally shown no very favourable contrast to those of the Continent. The Queen has ever found her chief joy in domestic life; but, while at Windsor, Osborne, and London, she has, perchance, lived more or less in state, becoming the Sovereign of Great Britain, she has been most at home at Balmoral.

Probably that fact is explained not only by the charmingly romantic surroundings of the Highland castle, but also through the estate having been the private property of the late Prince Consort, who erected the house. He first leased the estate in 1848, and finally made the purchase for £33,000. The property extends over about 10,000 acres, in addition to certain hills, and, being on the right bank of the Dee, is fifty miles from Aberdeen and nine from Ballater. The estate formerly belonged to the Earls of Argyll, who sold it to the Earl of Fife. For persons seeking rest and change from the strain and hurry of London life there is no more attractive spot in the British Isles.

To see the Queen really at home, therefore, we have to follow her to Balmoral, where the surroundings are more in keeping with the royal taste than anywhere else. This fact gives additional charm or interest to the little book on the Sovereign's residence in the far North, which one apparently well acquainted with the circumstances has just issued.* Balmoral is the only place where the Queen can unburden from her royal state to enjoy the friendship and

* The Queen at Balmoral, by Frank Pope Humphrey (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1893).
sympathy of the common people. Being about 900 feet above sea-level, the spot was recommended by Sir James Clark as unrivalled in Scotland for its dryness and general healthfulness. It is a pleasant district, whether in spring, when the birches are in tender leaf and the broom bursting into yellow bloom, or in autumn, when the light pink with heather; or in autumn—the Queen's favourite season here—when there is an indescribable glory upon hill and valley of golden birch, pink heather, scarlet rowan, and brown bracken.

When the Queen and Prince Albert first visited Balmoral about forty-six years ago, their solitary retreat in the midst of the neighbourhood, in comparison with the fatigue and excitement of life in London, was irresistible. With the estate of Aberfeldy, which is leased from the Gordon family, and the forest of Ballochbuie, the land comprises a total of 40,000 acres.

An Act of Parliament stopped the railway from coming nearer than Ballater. The old-time Pyke Farm-house, which was built in 1760, was standing on the estate half a century ago, gave place to the present palace in 1853. This was selected by Prince Albert as one which would most suit the Queen's wishes and be the greater part of each day when it was shining. About 150 persons can be lodged in the castle.

Visitors may inspect the house when the Queen is not in residence, and on entering the hall one is confronted by stags' heads, and among them is the head of a boar which Prince Albert killed in the Fatheland. Then a second entrance, which was In 1869, confronts you in one direction, while in a recess is a life-size statue of King Malcolm of Scotland, 1073-1093. In the hall under glass, the George III Wellington hat and gloves, the sword given by the Prince of Wales, and the Star of India, which had service in the Crimean War and in the Indian Mutiny, are to be seen. The hall fireplaces were presented to the Queen by the Nobility and Gentry of Scotland, and were once the implements, showing the national chivalry, "the sturdy fire-dogs" beneath the chimney are said to be well fitted to bear up the logs of which the fire is always made." Beneath the life-size statue of the Prince Consort in the arch of the staircase is the inscription:

"In love and trust and duty, and with God's will, and therefore with all that is true, beautiful, and good."

Somewhat higher up the stairs is a boar's head by the late Emperor Frederick, who was betrothed to the Princess Royal at Balmoral. Bats of others who are gone also attract notice, for the walls where you recognise the likeness of the Grand Duke of Hesse, Prince Albert, the Princess Alice, Prince Leopold, Dr. Macleod, and Principal Tullibardine.

The four large empty spots of royal Stuart pattern, and the pictures are all engravings. Everything in the way of furnishing is comfortable and well-arranged; but the rooms are too elevated to suit the taste of the Queen, but royal state will come away disappointed. "Splendours are reserved for the royal palaces," Mr. Humphrey remarks; "But Balmoral is a home for the Queen at the houses which the Queen finds pleasure in perpetuating. The oldest of these is the Queen's bairn, put up on a memorable day in the fall of 1854 to commemorate the return of the estate. Then the Sovereign placed the first stone, Prince the second, and then others added to the pile, the Prince Consort placing the topmost stone. Each in the royal family has been commemorated by a bairn.

It was the late Lord Beaconsfield who said that the Queen worked harder than most of her subjects; and whether this is literally true or not, she undoubtedly leads a busy life for one who is midway between seventy and eighty years of age. She appears to attend to the management of her estates at Osborne and Balmoral, while as regards other matters we find it recorded that she is "so much at home" that she is so thoroughly conversant with the workings of every department—of every log one may say—in the vast governmental department as the Queen.

The Sovereign is a comparatively early riser, and will frequently breakfast at a small cottage a short distance from the castle, and in the morning, nothing being more congenial to royal taste than some seduced and romantic spot where the open air can be fully enjoyed without fear of intrusion. "At Osborne she has a summer-house, and at Windsor she rests upon the lawn of Frogmore House," we are told. "And Queen Victoria has been temporarily at a place, as at Holywood Palace, Edinburgh, which stands in anything but a secluded spot, she has contrived, with the aid of screens, to leave the castle in solitude, and does not write in the open air." It is on account of their perfect seclusion that the sheds, or cottage hunting-lodges, built among the trees and shrubs like Ballochbuie have never gone out of favour. In addition to these, however, the Queen has a portable room which can at once be erected anywhere like a tent, open or enclosed; according to taste. In former days this love of the open air prompted the Queen to take extensive walks about the castle, and even to make the ascent of the great hills in company with Prince Albert. Now that she has to walk with a stick, however, the Queen has to content herself with her morning and afternoon drive, while the town of the castle ground is to be made in a bath-chair. Mr. Humphrey tells a pretty little story relating to the early days at Balmoral which may be called—

THE CHILDREN AND THE COWS.

She, little Mary, in company with her favourite cow, called Maggie, would beg Maggie to herd the cows. Their business was to see that the cows did not get at the corn; but they being intent on play, the cows were turned and left to Maggie, who would have a little lad of five. When at last the cows were discovered feeding upon the corn, Maggie, true to that instinct which impels every son and grandson to his father's good name, even to a scapegoat for his or her own sins, fell upon Kenneth, scolding him violently for neglecting to look after the cows. In the midst of her tirade she heard a voice call Maggie, and looking up saw the Queen and Prince Albert in a path upon the hillside above. Maggie rose at once, took the clear voice of the Queen called Maggie, and then turned to Kenneth. "Maggie," she said kindly, "you should remember that Kenneth is a little boy and does not know how to keep the cows off the corn. It would be a better way to put up a string so that they cannot get at it." The children were instantly amused at the idea of a string being a sufficient guard; but, mindful of what was due to the Queen, did not smile. Not so Prince Albert, who laughed heartily at her, and the two children merrily.

With advancing years the Queen cannot do at Balmoral as she formerly could. The all-day drives across the Highlands have flown up, and she cannot alight from her carriage to call upon cottagers as was her wont in former years. The old folk she favours do not want for attention, however. One or another is summoned to the castle if the Queen cannot.
The royal mistress of Balmoral also manifests great interest in the quaint or picturesque customs of the Highlanders which come down from ancient times. One of these is Hallowe’en, when the torches and the dancing remind one of superstitions which have come down from the days of the old fire-worshippers. Centuries ago the day’s celebration might hardly have been considered complete without the burning of a witch at eventide; but as material for such a bonfire cannot now be obtained, a more simple programme is prepared—

"The Queen going out for her evening drive is met on her return by a crowd of servants, keepers, gillies, children, each bearing a torch made of splints of fir tied together. They escort the Queen to the door, and then they march round and round the castle, the glare of their torches illuminating wall, and turret, and tower. The excitement culminates in the great bonfire at night, when in solemn procession "the witch" appears in a cart to be consigned to the flames, which in the good old times might have been considered her native element.

It was a happy day for the poorer sort of people of Deeside when Prince Albert purchased the Balmoral estate. The shanties, barely better than the cabins of Ireland, though made of stone, were such as had served Highland peasants for time immemorial; but these were at once superseded by neat cottages of an approved pattern. The cottagers are thus not only well cared for, but each is known by sight and by name, and when accident or sickness occurs the royal sympathy appears to be never wanting. Thus, one old lady on the estate met with an accident, and a telegram was sent from Windsor to say that she was to have whatever was necessary sent from the castle. In regard to the tenants of the estate, the Queen has a good memory. "She does not confuse your neuralgia with rheumatism," it is said; "nor inquire as to the condition of your left arm when you have a fever." Many of the cottagers have gifts which they will tell a visitor, they received from the Queen’s own hands: it may be the privilege for a gown, some trinket which will become heirloom, a statuette or flower-pot from the Continent. While abroad, the Queen is said to buy of the especial industries of the place where she is staying, and many things appear to be purchased expressly for the Balmoral cottars.

In the season they also receive gifts of venison and beef at Christmas, while from the Christmas-tree at Osborne unfortunates from the distant Highlands will invariably receive their gifts. Better than this was the establishment of schools before the days of national education, and, as is well known, the profits of the royal books on Life in the Highlands were devoted to the founding of bursaries or scholarships. Mr. Campbell, parish minister of Crathie, is one of the royal chaplains, and his name contains many presents from his Sovereign; pottery from Montrose, an exquisite group probably the most famous in history; but his contemporary Grant, and his successor, as attendant on the Queen, Francis Clarke, will also be remembered. It was Prince Albert who first discovered the qualities of John Brown when the latter was a stable-boy, and he soon got promoted until he was the Queen’s chief attendant. Perhaps there never was a more faithful man, without exaggeration, one has ventured to say of him, "I believe he would have stood between the Queen and a bullet any day." Everybody does not agree to be twitted that the Queen’s Indian empire is represented in the royal household by an Indian secretary, a personal Indian attendant, and the native Indian cook.

There are four shields on the Balmoral estate—hunting—lodges, in which any holiday-makers from London might think themselves fortunate in being permitted to pass a night. The nearest of these, named after the Queen, is three miles from the castle. The Dining Shield, in the wood, is surrounded by what is a remnant of the ancient forest. Everything indicates that we are entering the heart of a great forest. No sight or sound of an outer world greets us. Great Scotch fir shooting us in on every hand; the atmosphere is loaded with their resinous fragrance. When the beams of the low-water sun strike them, their red bark glows like the decaying embers of an ingle-nook. In cooler weather it is a reddish purple. Their tall, straight trunks have a columnar aspect, and on a hillside, as you look up, you fancy you are gazing through vast portieres into the mysterious depths of prodigious halls, wherein once dwelt prehistoric giants. In fact, you may fancy anything you like, as you find yourself seized upon, taken possession of by the spirits of the Balloch Buie. Now and then an ancient birch, gnarled, crooked, and patched with black moss, breaks the uniformity of the pines."

Thus Balmoral is one of the most interesting spots in England, and in the future will have memories which will echo through the ages. In Court, Kensington, and Holyrood, though the rooms at the last-named palace are said to be the most interesting suite in Europe. Mr. Humphrey’s book is very readable: he is somewhat of an enthusiast in the matter of royalty, and he seems to have explored for himself the wide and enchanting domain of Balmoral.

G. H. P.