

THE UNINVITED GUEST

AN argument with a wild mountain goat on the edge of a precipice can be decidedly unpleasant. He's a strong beast, and quite capable of defending himself and his family when obliged to do so. I frequently meet with them when climbing the mountains in the Scottish and Welsh Highlands, but with one or two exceptions I have never found them deliberately aggressive. This I believe is due to the fact that one seldom gets near enough to warrant aggression. Generally, I find them shy, and somewhat fearful of the close proximity of man, but their curiosity with regard to his every movement is as amusing as it is remarkable.

To what extent these goats can be regarded as really wild I cannot say, but would venture an opinion that most of the wild herds roaming the Highlands today are direct descendants of the domestic species that were rendered homeless during the periods of the mass evictions of the glen crofters who once owned them, and this particularly about 1845.

It was in June of 1946 that I was enjoying an easy day's stravaig from Lochinver, through Baddidarach and Ardroe, to Achmelvich. The main object of this scramble o'er corrie and crag was to ascertain the piscatorial values or qualities of a cluster of lochs which were bejewelled with rowan-tree, heather, and birch-clad rocks guarding them in their wild romantic settings. There are fourteen lochs within an area of four square miles, bounded by Baddidarach and Loch Inver on the south, the wild



PLATE XII

A PLEASING PROSPECT FROM THE COTTAGE AT
BADDIDARACH

Formerly, Lochinver's Gaelic name was An Felin, meaning, appropriately enough, 'A Pleasing Prospect'. To the left is Canisp, accompanied by the dome of Suilven's 'Grey Castle'. The castellated building beside the pier, and the estuary of the Culag River, is the Culag Hotel, formerly, until 1880, the Duke of Sutherland's residence. The bungalows facing are in the modern half of this historic old village.

adventurous Lochinver-Drumbeg road on the east, sea-loch Roe and Achmelvich of the wondrous sands to the north, with Soyea Island and the brine of the Atlantic on the west. Loch Dubh (the Black Loch), covering some one hundred acres, is the largest of the freshwater lochs, and a most sinister looking prospect she is on a grey day. Her north, south, and eastern shores are heavily guarded by precipitous, heather-decked, rowan and birch-fringed rocks, varying in height from thirty to one hundred feet. Formidable cliffs, affording little mercy to any novice who tries to climb them. On a bright sunny day the prospect is most charming, and the scramble is well worth the energy expended to enjoy such wonderful scenery. From the braes above John Mackenzie's Glen Darach farm seven major peaks may be seen, segregated bastions of awesome mystery and grandeur.

With an ankle securely entwined in a clump of heather, it is a fascinating ploy to lie full length, with head and shoulders over the edge of such cliffs, and drop tiny, fluffy balls of sheep's wool on the water below. These attract, deceptively, the voracious trout, affording some idea of what acceleration from a standing start really means, when these ever-vigilant sprinters dart from their lairs with an optimism that is soon dispelled, as their lightning percipience detects the deception. With equal velocity they return, as though fearful of some invader coveting their hard-contested feeding point during their brief absence. Try it one day with the minute tips of a couple of feathers stuck in a rowan-berry. They never take them, but they do reveal their presence.

To angle for, hook and play a hefty trout from such a precarious observation point is an education indeed, and this is what I was actually doing when I realized I had an uninvited guest beside, or rather behind, me.

I had commenced my sandwich lunch in the cool shade

of the birches on the south-east side of the loch, my back rested against a tree, my legs dangling freely over an eighty-foot cliff. My rod was beside me, the cast adorned with a luscious pair of 'Shaggy Whaups' on tail and dropper. A real plop of a rise to a hookless decoy appeased my hunger meantime, and so, replacing the half-eaten morsel in the open container nearby, my right foot was soon secured in a heather tangle, the rod brought into action, and soon the 'Whaup Sisters' arrived like thistle-down on their ink-black stage, ruffled to their liking by a soft breeze, that moved them with the spirit of a kilted Highlander responding to the dithyrambic cadences of his native piob mhor. This Terpsichorean muse was soon dispersed with as an amorous two-pounder dashed from its unseen lair to embrace the leading lady, only to experience that woefully sad disillusionment as soon as it felt the unyielding grip of her barbed fangs. For fully ten minutes this denizen of the dark waters had remonstrated with her, and was still showing her the environments of half the loch, when I observed my lunch container flash past my left ear and on to the waters far below.

With half my torso suspended over the eighty-foot precipice, and my rod-gripping hands fully engaged in deadly combat with my aquatic contender, I struggled to obtain a backward glance, and ascertain the cause of this surprising flight of my lunch container, only to find myself staring into the virulent eyes of a swarthy-coloured tenant of the rocks.

The situation was as critical as my posture was precarious. I felt caught hopelessly off my guard against such an unexpected contingency. The trout had just completed a grand display of aquatic acrobatics, and had sought the depths of its lair beside the rock to sulk. There was a firm tension on everything, including myself, from the trout to the reel, and every muscle from my controlling hands

to the small of my back was enervated by the prolonged stay in such a strained position.

My eyes were glued on the flaming orbs of this bull of a goat, whose increasing agitation showed every inclination to dispute my right to remain on terra firma. He began to tap a tattoo with his forefeet, a sure indication that he meant serious business. It may have been providence that induced my captive below to dash from his deep lair to the surface of the loch at this vital moment, releasing the tension so suddenly as to cause the point of the rod to fly into the air as though the fish had freed itself. For a moment it scared my antagonist, and he turned tail for a yard or two. It was just a moment's respite that enabled me to scramble back to my knees, before he turned and advanced to his former position, when eye met eye again as determinedly as before.

The most I could lose below was a game trout that could live to fight another day, whereas if this horn-rimmed beast chose to charge me whilst I knelt on the brink I might lose far more should I fail to strike the water in an active condition to swim. Slowly I entangled some line round a heather clump, stuck the butt end and reel into the middle of it, and made a dash from the cliff edge to a rocky ledge a yard or two above him. Tension was much relieved as the eyes met again.

He looked a grand beast, as formidable and noble a specimen of the *capra hircus* that I have ever seen. There was something in his build and deportment that warranted the respect and admiration one has for a Royal at bay. His horns were of enormous length, thrown back in such fine curves that they almost touched his shoulder points; his beard, too, was patriarchal in its growth, and his flanks were draped with masses of swarthy-coloured hair. His general appearance blended perfectly with the wild and rugged environment of his undisputed kingdom.

All this was a split second observation as we weighed each other up in the prospect of battle. Having seen these wattled quadrupeds in deadly combat amongst themselves, I knew this one would adopt the usual tactics and bring those forefeet to bear upon me with a velocity of a stick of aerial bombs. It is an overwhelming form of attack that could easily batter the life out of a human being. The deer adopt the same tactics when fighting amongst themselves or against other enemies.

From my vantage point some four feet above him, the attack was awaited on my bended knees. He reared and lunged forward, bringing those formidable forefeet into play, but, having to breast the bank, he couldn't quite reach me, and before he could regain his balance to repeat the tattoo I lunged at him, gripping his horns with both hands and twisting his neck after the manner in which I had been taught to deal with rams and horned sheep at the shearing in my childhood days. Down we thumped together to his own ground level, and having got the brute on its back, with all fours in the air, he was soon subdued. That neck-twisting operation is painful but not harmful, and a sure method of asserting one's superiority over man or beast, that is, when the necessity for self-preservation demands such tactics. An open-palmed whack on his tummy revived him to action as he struggled to regain his feet, deciding that to use them in a hasty retreat to his stronghold amongst the crags was preferable to another twinge in the neck. Goats when fighting do not use their horns as much as most people think they do, that vicious tattoo with their forefeet being their main form of attack.

They beat this tattoo with incredible speed and intent when attacking one of their pet aversions—the adder.

Returning to my rod, I found the trout was still on, and as the line tightened on him again he gave a mighty leap,

broke me, and plonked into the inky depths below, to remain there, I hope, until I return to renew my associations with this natural rock-garden of the enchanting fourteen lochs and the stonghold of the mountain goat.