

CHAPTER VIII.

THE LEFT BANK OF THE RIVER FINDHORN, BELOW COULTERNOSE,
WITH THE INCIDENTS OF THE FLOOD IN THE PLAIN OF
FORRES, TO THE CONCLUSION OF OLD KERR'S STORY.

THE discharge of water, wreck, and stones, that burst from the pass at the Craig of Coulternose, over the extensive plain of Forres, spreading devastation abroad on that rich and beautifully hedge-rowed country, was quite terrific. In treating of this important part of my subject, I shall first discuss the incidents on the left bank.

On Monday, the 3d of August, Dr. Brands of Forres was called professionally to the western side of the river. He forded on horseback ; and, ere he had crossed the second branch of the

stream, he saw the flood coming thundering down. His horse was caught by it ; he was compelled to swim ; and he had not long touched dry land, ere the river had risen 6 feet. Whilst at dinner at Moy, he observed it branching out into numerous streams, and a lady present emphatically repeated the remarkable old prophecy—

“ Says Divie to Dorback whar shall we sweep,
Through the middle o’ Moy when a’ men sleep.”

After dinner Mr. Suter accompanied Dr. Brands to visit a cottage on the embankment, tenanted by James Findlay, a boatman, better known by his *nom de guerre* of old Rodney.* From the back of his house, they beheld the Findhorn rolling along in awful grandeur, the effect being greatly heightened by the contrary direction of the northerly wind, then blowing a gale. Mr. Suter earnestly urged the old man, and his wife Janet, to abandon their dwelling, and go up to the house of Moy. “ Thank ye, Sir,” replied Rodney, we’ll gang up to the Black Barn,† at the Square, whar I’m thinkin’ we’ll hae plenty o’ company or lang.” The gentlemen then went to a row of cottages, called Stripe Side, which they likewise urged the inhabitants to quit. Their advice was taken by all but the family of one Kerr, who, trusting to their great distance from the river, refused to move.

After their return to Moy, the door of the apartment where the gentlemen were sitting was suddenly burst open, about ten o’clock, by a servant boy, breathless with haste and alarm. “ The Findhorn’s rolling by the Square, Sir ! There’s a heap o’ houses down at the Broom o’ Moy, and four or five fook drowned, and a’ the rest o’ them in the kitchen, Sir ! ” Actuated by one impulse to fly to the aid of their fellow creatures, both sprang up, and hurried down stairs. Entering the kitchen, to gather farther intelligence, they found a number of dripping and shivering women and children crowding round a blazing fire. A knocking at the door was heard, and without farther preface, in stalked one Andrew Smith, with a child in his arms, inquiring, “ Is Maister Suter here ? Ou aye, I see he is. Come awa ben then, lassie,” said he, looking over his shoulder to his wife, who followed him, “ this is no a time for ceremony,” and Mrs.

* See the plan of the Findhorn in the Plain of Forres, for this and the other places mentioned in the text.

† A long apartment, with a great fire-place, erected by the late Colonel Grant of Moy, for receiving the tenantry on certain occasions.

Smith immediately appeared with six or seven children hanging about her. "The water's a' in aboot the houses o' the Broom o' Moy, an' some o' them ha'e fa'en else. Thank Providence that we ha'e escapit. I ken ye'll no grudge us quarters, Mr. Suter. But troth I fear," added he, shaking his head portentously, "there's mony a ane will no ha'e siccan luck. There's twa families yonder wholly surrounded, and as for poor Sandy Smith! Poor *Funnns*! Naebody can ever houpp till see him or his family again." The general anxiety was greatly excited by this alarming account of the situation of Sandy Smith, an active boatman, commonly called Whins, or, in the provincial pronunciation, *Funnns*, from his residence on a piece of furzy pasture, at no great distance from the river. The site of his dwelling was the most critical of all; and, by the united opinion of those who were present, he was already given up for lost. But, on going out, they were cheered by observing the far distant gleam of light that issued from his window. "I have often heard of a ray of hope," said Mr. Suter, "but this is the first time I have ever experienced it in a literal sense."

Hurrying away to a field in the vicinity of the offices, they found a number of people stretching their eyes through the gloom of night, athwart the inundation, anxious for the fate of the Kerrs, whose escape from Stripeside had been arrested by the flood surrounding the houses. But farther consideration for them was extinguished for a time, by the loud screams that proceeded from the gardener's wife and children near the offices at Moy. They hastened thither, and found the flood rushing strongly about the house. It was not yet too deep to wade, but the river was making rapid advances, whilst the people were debating what was best to be done. "I will go myself and save them!" cried Mr. Suter. "God forbid that ye should risk yoursel' alane, Sir!" said an elderly woman standing by; "I'll gang wi' ye." "Come along then, madam," said he, offering his arm to the old lady, whom he now recognised to be Widow Ross, his washerwoman, who had only a short time before escaped with her children, from her house at Stripeside, with the loss of everything she had in this world. "Come along! we shall try it, at all events." They entered the water, and, after three or four paces, it became deep. They had to pass through a gate, where the current was strong. "No fear, Widow!" said Mr. Suter, "lean more on my arm." By this time they were up to the middle in water. "Haud mair to that side, Sir," cried the widow, "there's a deep well here, and we may fa' intil't." They reached the cottage door. "What's the meaning of this delay?" demanded Mr. Suter. "Come, young fellow," said he, address-

ing himself to the gardener's youngest son, and bending his body to receive him, "leap upon my back." The little urchin joyfully obeyed, and, in ten minutes, the whole family were saved.

By this time the lawn was covered with cattle and sheep, and the stables filled with horses from the adjacent farms; and, on visiting the Black Barn, old Rodney's bulky form, and the tall erect figure of his wife Janet, were seen rising over such a group, as might have furnished Wilkie with materials to fill a canvas. Mr. Suter gave orders for everything necessary for their comfort, and most of the women and children were sent up to the house for better accommodation.

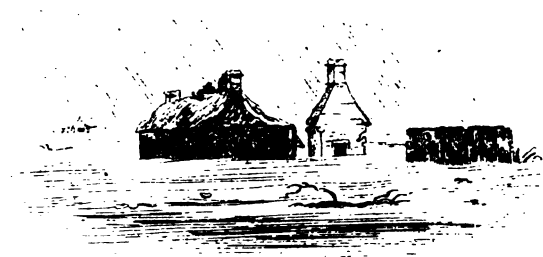
The gentlemen returned drenched to Moy. "Have the gardener's people been taken care of?" demanded Mr. Suter. "I was in the servants' hall this moment," replied Mrs. Suter, "where I saw no less than thirteen children round an immense bicker* of brose, using their spoons to the best possible purpose." "Let candles be placed in all the windows of the house," said Mr. Suter, "that poor *Whins*, if yet in existence, may know that he is not forgotten amidst the horrors of this awful night. But, alas! his light no longer burns!" Seeing that, in the midst of tempest and darkness, any attempt to assist those who were in distress must be utterly vain, Mr. Suter proposed to retire to rest. "Why are you not in bed?" demanded Mrs. Suter, of an old and privileged woman-servant, whom she met in her way. "Me in bed!" was the reply; "Hoo could I gang till my bed, and five or sax weans in 't?"

At day-break Dr. Brands hurried down to the offices, and ascended the tower to look out from the top. The prospect was awful. The wide waste of waters was only bounded by the rising grounds about Forres, skirting the flooded plain to the south—by those about Dalvey to the west—whilst, towards the north and east, the watery world swept off uninterruptedly into the expanding Firth and the German Ocean. He looked anxiously for the houses of Stripe Side. They were still standing; but the powerful and agitated stream that rolled around them, and between them and the offices, seemed to threaten their speedy destruction. The embankments appeared to have everywhere given way; and the water that covered the fields, lately so beautiful with yellow wheat, green turnips, and other crops, rushed with so great impetuosity in certain directions, as to form numerous currents setting furiously through the quieter

* Wooden dish, made with staves and hoops like a tub, but shallow and broad.

parts of the inundation, and elevated several feet above it. As far as the eye could reach, the brownish-yellow moving mass of water was covered with trees and wreck of every description, whirled along with a force that shivered many of them against unseen obstacles. Even in the immediate vicinity of the offices, the Doctor saw one of those streams, created by a hollow in a turnip field, root up two large spreading elms, and sweep them into the abyss. There was a sublimity in the mighty power and deafening roar of the waters, heightened by the livid hue of the clouds, the sheeting rain, the howling of the wind, the lowing of the cattle, and the screaming and wailing of the assembled people, that rivetted Dr. Brands for some time to this elevated spot. As he stretched his eyes anxiously over the watery plain, he could dimly descry the far-off dwelling of poor Funns, its roof rising like a speck above the flood, that had evidently made a breach in one of its ends. The southern gable of the row of houses at Stripe Side, too, was broken, and they appeared to be in the greatest jeopardy.

Anxious for the fate of the Kerrs, Mr. Suter went to the offices, about seven o'clock in the morning, and there he found their son, his servant, Alexander Kerr, who, since last night, had never left the spot. He was still gazing towards Stripe Side, in an agony of mind, and weeping for the apparently inevitable destruction of his parents, their rescue appearing utterly impossible. Mr. Suter tried to comfort him; but, even whilst he spoke, the whole gable of Kerr's dwelling, which was the uppermost of the three houses composing the row, gave way, and fell into the raging current. Dr. Brands, who was looking on intently at the time with a telescope, observed a hand thrust through the thatch of the central house. It worked busily, as if in despair of life; a head soon appeared; and at last Kerr's whole frame emerged on the roof, and he began to exert himself in drawing out his wife and niece. Clinging to one another, they crawled along the roof, towards the northern chimney. The sight was torturing. Kerr, a little a-head of the others, was seen tearing off the thatch, as if trying to force an entrance through the roof, whilst the miserable women clung to the house-top, the blankets which they had used to shelter them, almost torn from them by the violence of the hurricane (Plate XXVIII.); and the roof they had left yielding and tottering, fell into the sweeping flood. The thatch resisted all Kerr's efforts; and he was now seen to let himself drop from the eaves on a small speck of ground higher than the rest, close to the foundation of the back wall of the buildings, which was next the spectators. There he finally succeeded in bringing down the



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PL. XXXI.



PL. XXXII.



women, and there he and they stood without even room to move. "Good God, friends!" exclaimed Alexander Shaw, nephew to old Kerr, and brother to the girl who was in danger so imminent, "will you allow human beings to perish before your eyes, and do nothing to give them help? If I had but a boat I would try to save them. Will nobody give me a horse to go in search of one?" "Take mine!" said Mr. Suter, whose horse was standing by, "Take mine, and ride where you will." "And I will go with you," said Dr. Brands, throwing himself into his saddle.

All direct communication with the country northward of Moy was cut off by the flood of the burn meeting that of the river, and floating entirely over the bridge; they therefore took their way by the avenue on the south side of the house. At the gate, about 100 yards in front of it, they found the water very deep; but, though their horses were frequently swimming, they managed to get on by keeping the line of the road. At the distance of a mile from Moy, the water became so deep and strong that they were compelled to make for the rising grounds. The lad now left Dr. Brands, with the intention of going round by Dalvey, towards Earnhill and Kincorth, whilst the Doctor proceeded towards the Bridge of Findhorn, with the hope of getting one of the fishermen's cobs. As he was approaching the bridge, he learned that the last of the three arches, that on the west, had fallen the instant before; and, when he got to the brink, the waters were sweeping on, as if it had never been, making the rocks and houses vibrate with a distant and tremulous motion. At the Turnpike House, at the end of the bridge, he was told that all the boats had been swept away.

From the brow of the bank to the north-east of the toll-house, Dr. Brands commanded a full view of the flooded country from one extremity to the other. The mightiness of the inundation baffled all description. The waters, breaking out from the pass at Coulternose, covered Mundole, and swept furiously through the estate of Balnagieth, carrying corn, trees, hedges, and everything along with them, and rolling over the strong embankment lately constructed along the turnpike road by Mr. Leslie. Meanwhile the chief current was playing furiously against the southern approach of the bridge; and, whilst Dr. Brands was looking at it, the usually dry arch, at its farther end, burst with a loud report, its fragments, mixed with water, being blown into the air as if by gunpowder. Sweeping past the ruins, and striking against the rock on the left bank, it rushed onwards till it encountered the current from Balnagieth. The strife of their contention was terrible. The left flank of

the flood was forced over a young plantation on the estate of Dalvey, and the farm of Waterside, while the main body rushed directly down on the Greeshop embankments, sweeping them, and the wood behind them, clear before it, with resistless force, rolling over the whole of that estate, and over the flat land on both sides of the turnpike road, straight onwards to Forres. The row of fishermen's houses, on the right bank, a little below the bridge, were already in one mass of ruin, and the scene of devastation was complete. The centre of the main stream was hurried on at an elevation many feet higher than the rest of the surrounding sea of waters, the mighty rush of which exhibited a power and velocity altogether indescribable. Magnificent trees, with all their branches, were dashing and rending against the rock, and the roaring and crashing sound that prevailed was absolutely deafening.

Looking down to the houses of Waterside, the hamlet of Broom of Moy, and others, the Doctor could see nothing but a few roofs peeping from the midst of the inundation; and, as there was now no chance of getting a boat, he returned towards Moy. In his way thither, his mare was compelled to swim for a great way, and she afterwards stuck in the mud where she touched the ground, and was nearly drowned.

When the Doctor reached the house, about ten o'clock, he found Mr. Suter looking through a telescope at poor Funns and his family. The glass was a good one, and brought them so close that the eye could detect every movement they made. They were huddled together on a spot of ground a few feet square, some 40 or 50 yards below their inundated dwelling. (Plate XXIX.) He was sometimes standing and sometimes sitting on a small cask, and, as the beholders fancied, watching with intense anxiety the progress of the flood, and trembling for every large tree that it brought sweeping past them. His wife, covered with a blanket, sat shivering on a bit of a log, one child in her lap, and a girl of about 17, and a boy of about 12 years of age, leaning against her side. A bottle and a glass on the ground, near the man, gave the spectators, as it had doubtless given him, some degree of comfort. Above a score of sheep were standing around, or wading or swimming in the shallows. Three cows and a small horse, picking at a broken rick of straw that seemed to be half afloat, were also grouped with the family. Dreading that they must all be swept off, if not soon relieved, the gentlemen hastened to the offices, and looked anxiously out from the top of the tower for a boat. At last they had the satisfaction to see one launched from the garden at Earnhill, about a mile below. The young man who went in the direction



PEASANTS TENDING THEIR CATTLE IN A FLOODED FIELD.

of Kincorth, found that Mrs. Grant had already ordered out a pair of horses to convey the boat to the spot where it was committed to the waves;* and it was immediately manned by Donald Munro, overseer to Mr. Loudon, at Earnhill, William Smith, salmon-fisher, and Tom Fraser, floater, who nobly volunteered to proceed, in the first place, to the rescue of the family of a man named John Smith, who were in the most perilous situation imaginable, in the island opposite to Earnhill. The gentlemen on the tower watched the motions of this boat with the liveliest interest. They saw it tugging up till an intervening wood hid it from their view. Again it was seen beyond, making, as it were, for Rodney's cottage, as they hoped with the intention of reaching Stripe Side. But in an instant it dashed into the main stream, and disappeared behind the wood with a velocity so fearful that they concluded its destruction certain. But in a moment it again showed itself, and the brave fellows were seen plying their oars across the submerged Island of Earnhill, making for John Smith's cottage; the thatch, and a small part of the side-walls, of which only were visible above the water; so that, by the means of the telescope, the gentlemen saw the poor inmates actually dragged out of the windows, from under the water, having been obliged to duck within, ere they could effect their escape. The boat then swept down the stream towards a place called The Lakes, where John Smith, his wife, and her mother, were safely landed.

The boat was now again brought up by the Kincorth horses to a point near the bridge over the Moy Burn. There Donald Monro again sprang forward, and Serjeant John Grant, an old pensioner from Findhorn, with David Reat, from Kinteach, and Robert Dallas, claimed the honour of the Stripe Side adventure. After bringing the boat across the flooded bridge, they, with great difficulty, crossed the stream on the Moy side of it, and pulled along the road till the current became so strong that the people who waded breast deep to meet them, were compelled to haul them up by means of ropes. There was one individual in the boat whose exertions Mr. Suter says he can never forget. The others were sufficiently active, but he was both physically and morally more energetic than they, and his conduct was so conspicuous as to call forth the frequent and united plaudits of all present. This was Donald Monro, who, from certain remarkable parts of his dress, was that day called *Straw Hat* and *Yellow Waistcoat*—titles under which he gained

* See the track of this boat on the sketch of the Findhorn from Coulternose to Binsness.

so much honour that he may well be proud of them for the rest of his life. He was now at the prow, now at the stern, now in the water to the neck, and again he was tugging hard at the oar; in short, he seemed to be the chief instrument of deliverance.

Having pulled up as far as they could in the still water, they approached the desperate current formerly noticed as having swept away the two elms, and fearlessly dashed into its tumultuous waves. For a moment the spectators were in the most anxious doubt as to the result; for, though none could pull a stronger oar, yet the boat, in crossing a distance equal to its own length, was swept down 200 yards. Ten yards more would have dashed them to atoms on the lower stone-wall. But they were now in comparatively quiet water; and, availing themselves of this, they pulled up again to the park, in the space between two currents, and passed, with a little less difficulty, though in the same manner, the second and third streams, and at length reached the houses. The spectators gave them three hearty cheers. By this time the Kerrs had been left scarcely three feet of ground to stand on, under the back wall of the houses. A pleasing sight it was to see the boat touch that tiny strand, and the despairing family taken on board. After they were safely stowed, Yellow Waistcoat was observed wading, and sounding his way with a pole, till he reached the west end of the building, where he pounced upon an enormous hog, which he lugged down to the boat, and threw in as easily as if it had been a rabbit. "My indignation was stirred up against the Kerrs," said Mr. Suter, "thinking that, at such a time, they could have thought of risking Monro's life for such a purpose." But I was afterwards pleased to learn that it was to preserve "poor Widow Ross's soo, which was a' that was noo left till her."

How anxiously did the spectators watch every motion of the little boat that was now so crowded as very much to impede the rowers. They crossed the two first streams, and finally drew up for the last and dreadful trial. There the frail bark was again whirled down; and, notwithstanding all their exertions, the stern just touched the wall. The prow, however, was in stiller water; one desperate pull; she sprang forward in safety, and a few more strokes of the oar landed the poor people amongst 50 or 60 of their assembled friends. Then was there a meeting between parents and son! What gratulations! What greetings and embracings! What grappling of hearts and moisture of eyes ensued! All crowded round them to obtain one squeeze of their hands. "Hoot toot, nonsense!" cried the weather-

beaten Rodney, dashing his rough hand across his eyes, "What's this o't? Toots! I canna stand this mair than you, bairns. Od, I maun just greet it out."

Old Kerr's account interested them all. Seeing their retreat cut off by the flood, they attempted to wade ashore. But the nearer the shore the deeper and more powerful was the current. The moment was awful. The torrent increased on all sides, and night, dark night, was spread over them. The stream began to be too deep for the niece, a girl of twelve years of age—she lost heart, and began to sink. At this alarming crisis, Kerr seems to have been gifted with preternatural strength and presence of mind. He seized the trembling girl, and placed her on his back, and, shoulder to shoulder with his wife, he providentially, but with the greatest difficulty, regained his own house. Between eight and nine o'clock, he groped his way, and led his wife and niece up into the garret. He could not tell how long they remained there, but supposed it might be till about two o'clock next morning, when the roof began to fall. To avoid being crushed to death, he worked anxiously till he drove down the partition separating them from the adjoining house. Fortunately for him, it was composed of wood and clay, and a partial failure he found in it very much facilitated his operations. Having made their way good, they remained there till about eight o'clock in the morning, when the strength of the water without became so great that it bent inwards the bolt of the lock of the house door, till it had no greater hold of the staple than the eighth part of an inch. Aware that if the door should give way, the back wall of the house would be swept down by the rush of the water inwards, and that they would be crushed to atoms, he rummaged the garret, and fortunately found a bit of board and a few nails, and, standing on the stair, he placed one end of it against the door, and the other on the hatch forming the entrance to the garret, and so nailed it firmly down. At last the roof of the second house began to crack over their heads, and Kerr forced a way for himself and his companions through the thatch, as has been already told.

"We syne crawled out ower the tap o' the neist hoose," said Kerr, in telling his own story, "and, on our way, Jean's leg gaed throw an awfu' gap atween the lumm and the roof. I then thoct to try Meggy Ross's winda in the front, but Jean wudna lat me, for fear I might fa' i' the water, an' syne she thought a' wad be lost. I then gaed to the back, and tried to get into Hugh's, but I wusna' fit to break the kebbers o't; an' it was as weel, for a pairt o' it soon fell. I then teuk for the gruu', and drappit down on a wee bit spat, where I fand an auld cupple

log, which Hugh had bought for fire. I heezed it up. There was a hunnin pin in 't, and that was like a stap, and sae I gat them doon, praised be the Lord!" Here the poor man gave a heartfelt sigh of gratitude. "I then brak Hugh's back winda, and we gat in. Hugh's twa kists war soomin' through the room like onything. There was a cauf bed and some claes there, and that keepit huz some warm; and, as soon as it was some clear, Jean wadna' bide in, for fear o' the house fa'in'. Whan we saw the boat first, we thocht it was for huz; but what was our thocht when we saw it whurlin' awa doon the water again!" "Did you pray at all?" demanded Mr. Suter. "Deed, Sir, I dinna ken fat we did, but fan we heard the hooses fa'in' aboot huz, and it sae dark, troth we couldna think o' onything but death."