

CHAPTER XVIII.

JULY.

Shore Birds ; arrival of—Foxes—Herring, and Herring-fishing ; Birds, etc., feeding on them—Herring-fishing in Sutherland—A Sharper—Numbers of Flounders—Young Wild-fowl—Roe ; habits of—Midges—Angling—Floods in the Findhorn—Prophecy of a Woman—Escape of a Shepherd.

ABOUT the second week of July the shore and sands are enlivened by vast flocks, or rather clouds, of dunlins, ring-dottrels, and other birds of the same kind, who now, coming down from their scattered breeding-places, collect in immense companies. When the tide ebbs, all these birds are employed in searching for the minute shell-fish and animalcula on which they feed ; and vast indeed must be the supply required. About the lochs and swamps the young snipes and redshanks begin to fly, and with the wild-ducks afford plenty of shooting.

The young sea-gulls, too, are numerous about the bar and sandbanks, and are easily distinguished from the old ones by their fine mottled brown plumage.

Great numbers of all these birds must be killed by foxes, etc. ; for every day I observe their fresh

tracks along the shore and round the lochs. Near a fox's hole in one of the woods I saw an almost incredible collection of remains and *dissecta membra* of ducks, turkeys, fowls, game of every kind, and even of roe: apparently a litter of young foxes had been brought up in it.

On the 12th of July the Nairn herring-boats are all launched to reap their uncertain harvest of herrings. Of late years the supply does not seem to be nearly so regular or so much to be depended on as formerly; and frequently the men are but badly repaid for all their expense and risk. The cost of a herring-boat here, complete, with its rigging, nets, etc., is not much less than ninety pounds; and the wear and tear of the nets is very great, owing to bad weather and other causes: the hull alone of the boat costs about twenty-seven pounds. There are five men in each boat; and Nairn alone sends out about sixty boats, so that from that small place not less than three hundred able-bodied men are for six or seven weeks employed in the pursuit of this small but valuable fish. The herrings are generally bought up beforehand by the fish-curers at Helmsdale, on the Sutherland coast, and at other parts, who contract to take the whole proceeds of the season's fishing at a fixed price; so that, notwithstanding the immense number caught, the supply of

fresh herrings through the country is but scanty. The fish are, with as little delay as possible, packed in casks with brine, and in this state are exported to all parts of the kingdom. The barrels are made principally of birch. Fir will not answer the purpose, as it gives a taste of turpentine to the whole contents of the barrel. I have been out in a herring-boat during the fishing; and a very beautiful sight it is to see the nets hauled in with thousands of herrings, looking in the moonlight like so many pieces of the brightest silver flashing in the calm water. When not employed with the nets, the men generally fish with hooks for cod, halibut, etc.; all fish caught in this manner being the perquisite of the man who catches them; and frequently they make a good profit by this, as the cod collect in vast numbers about the herring fishing-grounds, and are caught as quickly as the hooks can be dropped into the water. Sometimes the cod, their great indistinctly-seen forms looking like the pale ghosts of fish, come close to the surface round the boats, and seize the bait as soon as it touches the water. Hauling these heavy gentry up from the depth of several fathoms is very severe work for the hands.

The herrings seem the most persecuted of all the races of living creatures. From the moment when the great shoals of them appear in the north and

north-west, they are pursued by thousands and tens of thousands of birds and countless numbers of fishes ; and wherever the herring shoals are, *there* are these devourers. From the aristocratic salmon to the ignoble and ferocious dog-fish, all follow up and prey upon the shoals ; whilst their feathered foes mark out their track by the constant screaming and plunging into the water which they keep up during their pursuit. The Solan geese from mid-air dash with unerring aim on the bright and silvery fish ; whilst the cormorants and other diving sea-fowl pursue the dense crowd with indefatigable eagerness. In addition to all this, sea-gulls of every kind, like the skirmishers of an army, keep up a constant pursuit of all stragglers or wounded fish which come near enough to the surface to be caught by these birds, who have neither the power of the Solan goose, to pounce hawk-like on their prey (even when at some depth from the surface), nor the diving power of the cormorant or guillemot, who can pursue them deep down into the water. Altogether, a shoal of herring, with its numerous accompaniments, is a most amusing and interesting sight, independent of the consideration of the great importance of this fish to mankind, the number of people to whom it serves as food, and the number who are employed in its pursuit.

Besides the natives of the fishing villages, a considerable number of Highlanders from the western part of the country come down to earn a few pounds during the herring season; it is almost the only cash these poor fellows get hold of in the course of the year. Most of the boats belong to two or three proprietors each, who having in the course of many years laid by a few pounds, expend them in the purchase of a herring-boat. These men hire the services of four or five hands for the season, the duration of which is about six weeks, and give them a certain sum, according to agreement, generally about four to six pounds per man. Unluckily, many of the families of the herring-fishers derive but little benefit from the wages earned, as too frequently the men spend all the money, or nearly all, in drinking and rioting as soon as the fishing is over, and, instead of providing for their wives and children, are too apt to lounge about the whisky-shops as long as a farthing remains, never attending to the haddock or other fishing till driven again to exertion by sheer necessity. This, however, does not apply to the whole race of herring-fishers. Those men who come to the fishing on the east coasts from the Highlands generally take their money carefully home, depending on it for buying clothes, paying rent, procuring seed-potatoes,

and for any purpose where ready money is required.

To the spectator the pursuit of herrings in the magnificent sea-lochs of Sutherland is attended with much that is interesting and beautiful. When the fleet of boats makes its way up a creek running far into the land, and overhung by wild rocky precipices, which protect the boats from every breath of wind, keeping the sea as smooth as glass, and echoing and re-echoing every merry shout and call uttered by the fishermen during their pursuit, no description can give an adequate idea of the romantic beauty of such a scene with all its accompaniments. This, however, is the bright side of the picture, for many a dangerous gale and many a peril have the poor fellows to encounter who shoot their herring-nets off the bleak eastern coasts of the country, where they are exposed to the sudden gales and rolling seas of the Northern and German Oceans. Frequently, to save their lives, they are compelled to abandon their nets, fish, and all. Sometimes boats with their crews go forth to return no more, nor even to be again heard of in this world; and at other times they are driven to distant ports for safety, losing their tackle and time, and having to make their way back with scanty supply of provision to the port from which

they sailed, and probably losing their chance of fishing for the whole season.

Would it be believed that the herring-fisher, humble as his situation in life appears, is occasionally the object of a regular and systematic plan of swindling? A few years ago, a fellow made it his occupation and business to waylay these poor men as they returned home from the fishing-stations with their hardly-earned money in their pockets. His plan was to get into conversation with them, and after walking a mile or two along the road with them, to take generally one, but sometimes two, into a whisky-shop, of which there are plenty on every Highland road, under the pretence of treating them to a dram. Then, as opportunity offered, he produced a small flask from his pocket, which he said contained a sample of some rare whisky (having previously represented himself as a spirit-merchant travelling for orders), and as a special favour gave the fisherman a glass of its contents. It was no sooner swallowed, however, than the man became powerless and almost insensible; upon which the fellow quietly emptied the pockets of his victim and walked off, leaving him to recover as he could: which event in most instances did not take place for some hours afterwards. If, in going out, he met with the keeper of the whisky-shop, he told

him that the man was asleep from fatigue, or made some such excuse to escape suspicion. In this manner the fellow robbed above twenty fishermen of the whole proceeds of their fishing before the country got too hot for him ; when he went off by the coach and was no more heard of. The whole proceeding was described to me by one of his victims (at present in my service) who was robbed of about five pounds ; and, notwithstanding the cruelty of the case, I could not help being amused at the coolness with which the swindler appears to have turned the poor fellow's pockets inside out, the man all the while being quite conscious of what was going on, though utterly unable to move or speak. To add insult to injury too, on going out the swindler told the landlady that he was sorry to say the fisherman had got quite drunk, notwithstanding all the efforts he had made to prevent it and all the good advice he had given him. When at length the poor fellow recovered his senses and power of speech, he found it quite impossible to persuade his wife and friends that he had not wilfully and advisedly got drunk and squandered his money. However, at last the fair one was pacified, though not much comforted ; her husband's innocence being proved by the testimony of others who had been robbed in a similar manner, and by the

verdict of the doctor, who at once saw that some strong narcotic had been given to the man.

Among the available products of the sandy creeks and bays on this coast are immense quantities of excellent flounders. These fish come in with every tide, and though the great bulk of them return to the deep water, vast numbers remain in the pools which are formed at low water upon the sands. We occasionally drag some of these pools with a small trout-net, and are sure to catch a large quantity of these fish in one or two hauls. The flounders are of two kinds, the gray-backed flounder and a larger sort which has red spots. The latter, however, is a far inferior fish, the flesh being soft and flabby. Notwithstanding the abundance and excellence of the flounders, left, as it were, for any person to pick up, with scarcely any exertion, the country people very seldom take the trouble to catch them, excepting now and then by the line, in a lazy, inefficient way.

July, although not a month during which the sportsman finds much employment for his gun, is still to me a most interesting season. Every day that I walk by the lochs and swamps I see fresh arrivals in the shape of broods and flocks of young teal and wild-ducks, and this year there are numbers of pochards swimming about in compact companies.

Occasionally, too, when walking near the covers, an old roe, accompanied by her two large-eyed fawns, bounds out of some clump of juniper or brambles; and after standing for a short time to take a good look at me, springs into the wood and is soon lost to view; or an old solitary buck, driven by the midges from the damp shades of the woods, startles me by his sudden appearance near the loch side, springing over the furze and broom, on his way back to the more extensive covers.

The roe have a singular habit of chasing each other in regular circles round particular trees in the woods, cutting a deep circular path in the ground. I never could make out the object of this manœuvre, but the state of the ground proves that the animals must have run round and round the tree for hours together.

Tormented by midges and ticks, the bucks often wander restlessly through the woods at this season, uttering their bark-like cry; so like indeed is this sound to the bark of a dog, that it often deceives an unaccustomed ear. Of all torments produced by insects I can conceive nothing much worse than the attack carried on by the myriads of midges which swarm towards evening in the woods, particularly where the soil is at all damp. For a certain time the smoke of a cigar or pipe protects

one; but no human skin can endure for any length of time the inexpressible irritation produced by these insects.

This month is not, generally speaking, favourable to the angler. Salmon seem in most rivers to have given up moving, and the trout follow their example. Indeed the rivers are at this period very subject to great changes, being one day bright, clear, and very low; and perhaps the next flooded over bank and brae by some sudden and tremendous thunder-storm in the higher grounds, which renders the water thick and turbid. The Findhorn is peculiarly subject to these rapid changes, flowing as it does for a great part of its course through a mountainous, undrained, and uncultivated country, surrounded by lofty and rugged heights, from the clefts of which innumerable streams descend into the valley of the Findhorn. This river, on any sudden and violent storm of rain (fed as it is by so many burns), rises sometimes almost instantaneously; and what a few minutes before was a bright clear stream, fordable at all the shallower places, suddenly becomes a turbid swollen torrent, which neither man nor horse can cross. In those parts of the river where the channel is narrow and confined between steep and overhanging rocks these sudden risings take place more rapidly than in the lower

parts near the sea, where the river has room to spread itself out.

One day towards the end of the month I went with my two boys and a servant to shoot rabbits on the island formed by the junction of the Findhorn and another stream near the sea. The river was so low, in consequence of long-continued dry weather, that we crossed it on foot at a shallow where the water did not reach to our knees. The day was hot and the air heavy and oppressive; and although we had not had a drop of rain, we heard loud thunder during the whole morning, and saw heavy black clouds hanging in the west over the mountains through which the river runs. After idling about some time and shooting a few rabbits, etc., we went towards a small cottage built on the highest part of the island, in order to speak to the people who inhabited it. Whilst standing close to the door we heard a sudden scream from a woman at work in the little plot of garden, and looking round we at once saw the cause. The river, as the woman emphatically expressed it, was "*coming down.*" Over a wide space of sand and shingle, interspersed with patches of broom and furze, where a few moments before we had been hunting rabbits, there now came rushing down a wall of muddy water, carrying with it turf, stones, and

trees, rolling over and over, and uprooting every bush which opposed it. Several of the trees must have come some miles down the river, being large Scotch firs, with their branches, stem, and roots, the latter frequently still carrying in their twisted fibres great masses of the rocks on which they had grown. The water was coming down like a wall of several feet high, sweeping everything before it; and in far less time than I have taken to describe it, we were surrounded on all sides with its muddy torrent. Independently of the risk of being crushed to death by the floating and rolling trees, its rapidity was so great that the strongest swimmer could not have crossed it.

On came the flood, narrowing our little island every instant, by undermining and washing away the bank on which the cottage stood. Nevertheless I anticipated no more inconvenience than perhaps having to pass the night where we were: for the building had stood all the torrents of the Findhorn since the great flood of 1829, although its inhabitants had more than once been cut off from any communication with the mainland for several days together. But the water was already higher than it had ever been since *that* flood, and the women of the house were weeping in despair, their terrors being augmented by a prophecy which had lately

been uttered by an old hag in the neighbourhood, to the effect that all the country within six miles of the coast should be swallowed up by floods during the last week of this very July. So strong an effect had this prediction on the minds of the lower orders, that almost all the Highlanders who had come down to the coast, according to their custom, for the herring-fishing, had returned homewards without putting their foot in a boat, to the great loss and inconvenience of the owners of the boats and nets, who had reckoned on the usual assistance of these men. It is singular that floods of a most mischievous and unusual extent should actually have taken place at the very time this woman had foretold.

For my own part, I felt chiefly annoyed at the alarm our absence would occasion at home, as it was already evening, and we had no means of making signals or of sending word where we were, it being quite impossible to cross the river at any point.

The water still rose, and continued to do so for half an hour longer, washing away our standing-place slowly but constantly. On looking round I could not but feel most grateful at our not having been overtaken by it before we reached this part of the island. Had we been in many of the places over which we had so lately passed, we must have

been swept away at the first rise of the river, or, at best, have had to wade and scramble, at the risk of our lives, to some elevated point of land.

While standing near the house we saw two or three boats belonging to the ferryman and the salmon-fishers whirl past us. The flood having come on without the least warning, their owners had had no time to secure them. The rise, as I have said, continued for about half an hour, then suddenly it stopped, and in a few minutes the water began visibly to fall. Before long it fell more quickly, but still in no proportion to the rapidity with which it had risen. After it had been sinking somewhat above an hour, the tops of furze bushes began to appear above the water, and soon afterwards we saw a boat belonging to the salmon-fishers, well manned, and assisted by a rope held on the shore, coming down to a cottage a quarter of a mile above us. The main stream of the river was still quite impracticable; but this boat was coming down an old channel which was generally dry. By firing off my gun several times I caught the attention of the crew; and I was quite certain that they would know who it was that wanted help, and would come to us if possible. When the torrent had become somewhat less violent they came down, whirling through the flood to where we were. They

took us on board, and by dint of skilful and strong rowing, and help from the rope held by those on shore, we were at length landed in a field, *not* across the real channel of the river, but across the flooded land on the other side of us, where the force of the water was less violent. Although I have been in a good many situations of danger by water, I never felt so helpless as whilst we were dashing about at the mercy of the torrents, over bushes, banks, and stranded trees; had we come in contact with any one of which our small boat must have been upset, and then all chance of escape would have been out of the question. However, we landed safely, and although we were not above a quarter of a mile from my house, we had to walk round by the chain bridge, a distance of five miles. We got home soon after dark, and before our absence had caused any alarm. With us the rain did not begin till the evening, but we afterwards heard that, farther to the west, it had rained in torrents for many hours during the morning, accompanied by a most terrific thunderstorm, and that a great deal of damage had been done by the overflowing of different streams, which had broken up several bridges, and injured a great extent of land. A poor woman who happened to be wading the river a mile above us, at a place where it is divided into several streams,

was caught in one of them, and although she managed to get upon a high bank, the flood soon reached her, and she was kept a prisoner, standing in the water, which at one time reached to her middle, till the fishermen heard her cries, and succeeded in rescuing her. Had we been in many spots where we fished almost every day nothing could have saved our lives.

A singular instance of preservation from a similar danger happened during this same flood, but on a different river. On perceiving that the water was rising, a young man hurried across a shallow part to an island, on which were a few sheep grazing, intending to recross with them to the mainland before the flood had attained any serious height. He was, however, out in his reckoning; for he had scarcely set foot on the island when the river became so swollen that it was quite impossible for him to return. The flood soon covered the island, and the man had great difficulty to keep his footing, being up to his waist in water. To add to his danger, great pieces of timber and floating trees came sweeping past, any one of which, had it struck him, would have at once dashed him off the island. Several people who were on the shore, although so near, could do nothing to assist him. Presently the flood brought down, right upon the island, a

gigantic tree, with all its roots and branches, and it seemed certain that he must be swept away at once. He was given up by all the spectators, and they turned away their eyes, not daring to look at this last act of the scene. However, the very moment when the danger seemed the greatest was that of his deliverance; for the tree, in consequence of its great size and weight, grounded when within a yard of the man. He managed to scramble on to its branches, and to maintain his position until the waters subsided.

What becomes of the trout during these sudden floods it is not easy to say, unless, warned by instinct of the approaching danger, they retire to the deep holes and recesses under the banks, where the force of the water cannot reach them. It is very seldom that, on the receding of a flood, fish are found on the land, though certainly it occasionally happens that they are bewildered, and are either left high and dry or in the small pools at the sides of the river. When, also, the same cause that has made the stream overflow has filled the water with clay and dirt, the trout become sick and weak, and are unable to contend with a force of current which they could easily have withstood in clear water.

As the flood decreases both trout and eels take

to all the eddies and corners to feed on the numerous worms and grubs which are washed off the banks and fields into the water.

Very few birds, or, comparatively speaking, even land animals, fall victims to floods. The rabbits manage to climb up into the highest furze bushes, or even into the branches of trees, and it is very seldom that any birds make their nests within reach of this danger. In the same manner that terns and other birds who lay their eggs on the sea-shore seem to have an instinct which teaches them the exact line to which the highest spring-tides ever reach, so do the land birds avoid building their nests in places to which the land floods ever ascend.

