HIGHLAND RAMBLES.

SCOTTISH MOORLAND SCENERY.

The scenery of the less cultivated parts of our native Scotland, may, generally speaking, be said to be chequered, as human life is with its events; for as, during our pilgrimage here on earth, evil continually succeeds good, and good evil, so are beauty and deformity seen to alternate with each other on the simple face of Caledonia. A long stretch of dreary and uninteresting hill country is often found to extend between two rich or romantic valleys, so that the lover of nature has to plod his weary way from the one to the other, over many a mile of sterile desert; and, if he be a pedestrian, through many

a burn, and many a slough too, with little to disturb him, save the sudden *whirr* of the grouse, as he bounds off through the air with the velocity of a cricket-ball,—or the sharp *frisp* of the snipe as he rises like the cork from a brisk bottle of champagne, —or the wailing *teeweet* of the green plover, who, like some endless *seccatore*, most perseveringly follows his track, unceasingly boring him with his dull flapping, and his tiresome cry.

When not broken in upon by any such incidents, these wildernesses are sometimes rather valuable to a solitary traveller.—They afford him time for rumination whilst he is traversing them.—They give him leisure to chew the cud of reflection, and he is thus enabled to digest the beauties of the valley which he has last devoured, before he proceeds to feast upon the charms about to be presented to him by that to which he is hastening. But whatever may be the advantages to be derived from journeying in any such single state of blessedness, I am disposed to think that the man who has a cheerful companion or two associated with him in his pilgrimage, will not be much inclined to wish them absent in such parts of the way; and as I do not think that either his moral or his physical digestion will be in any

degree impaired by society, I am quite sure that his intellectual enjoyment will be thereby much increased.

My own experience convinced me of the truth of this, one fine Autumnal morning, when, in company with two friends, I left the romantic valley of the Findhorn, to cross the moorlands towards Grantown, a village which may be called the capital of Strathspey. The Sun that rose upon us, as we took our staves in hand to begin that day's walk, had continued to display a brighter and merrier countenance than any, perhaps, which I had ever seen showing face within the precincts of this vapour-girt island of ours. Yet vain were his friendly efforts to throw a glow of cheerfulness over the brown heaths, and the black plashy bogs almost entirely covering the tame unmeaning undulations of the country before us. A scene apparently less calculated to furnish food for remark or conversation, can hardly well be conceived. But when the imagination is not altogether asleep, a very trifling hint will set it a working; and so it was, that the innumerable grey, ghastly-looking pine stocks of other years, that were every where seen pointing out of the peat-mosses, from

amidst tufts of the waving cotton grass, and wiry rushes, and gaudy ranunculuses, quickly carried our minds back to former ages by a natural chain of connection, filled them with magnificent ideal pictures of those interminable forests which completely covered Scotland during the earlier periods of its history, and immediately furnished us with a subject for talk.

AUTHOR.—You see yonder hill, called *the Aitnoch.* Although it is, as you may easily perceive, the highest in all this neighbourhood, yet an extensive plain on its summit, almost entirely peat-moss, is so thickly set with the stocks and roots of pine trees, such as these you are now looking at, and all fixed, too, like these, in the growing position, that, if the boles and branches were still standing on them, it would absolutely be a difficult matter for a deer, or even for a dog, to force a passage through among them.

GRANT.—I should like much to mount the hill to examine the plain you speak of. Well as I am acquainted with this north country, I never heard of it before.

AUTHOR.—It will cost us little more than the additional fatigue created by its rather rough and

steep ascent to do so, for it is not quite an hundred miles out of our way.

CLIFFORD.—Phoo!—we are not to be tied to ways of any kind. Let us climb the hill then by all means.—But, to return to what you were talking about, can you tell us how, and for what purpose, these vast forests were annihilated?

AUTHOR.—The charred surfaces which most of these stocks and roots still exhibit, sufficiently prove that fire must have been the grand instrument of their destruction. The logs which originally grew upon them, but which are now found lying horizontally under the present surface, all bear testimony to the same fact in a greater or lesser degree. Many of these, indeed, when dug up, present a very curious appearance, the nether part being left almost entire, whilst the upper side has been hollowed like a spout. This must have been effected by the flames, which naturally continued to smoulder on the upper surfaces of the fallen trunks, whilst the moisture of the ground where they fell extinguished them below.

CLIFFORD.—Come,—that is all very well as to the *how*,—now, let us have your *wherefore*.

AUTHOR.—As to the causes of the devouring

element being let loose among these aboriginal forests, we might speculate long enough, for they were probably many and various. Accidental fires may have been kindled by the rude inhabitants, which afterwards spread destruction far and wide, as they often do now in the forests of America. Or they may have been raised with the intention of driving away wild beasts, or of aiding in their destruction—of annoying enemies—or even for the more simple purpose of clearing spots of ground for hunting or for pasture. The causes may have been trivial enough in themselves. You, Grant, who have travelled so much in Switzerland, must be aware of the practice which still prevails there, of burning down large patches of gigantic pine timber on the sides of the Alps, for no other reason than to allow the sun and the moisture to reach the surface of the ground, so as thereby to increase the quantity and value of the pasture growing beneath.

GRANT.—Yes, I can vouch for what you say with regard to the practice in Switzerland, and I am much inclined to think with you, that instead of attributing the fall of these mighty Caledonian forests, as many are disposed to do, to some one great and general catastrophe, we ought

rather to place their ruin to the account of a combination and reiteration of fortuitous causes, by the increasing frequency of the repetition of which they were rapidly extirpated in detail. Indeed, in support of what I now say, I remember having heard a well authenticated tradition of exactly such an accidental conflagration, which is said to have taken place so late as the year 1640.

AUTHOR.—I should be glad to hear the particulars of it. Do you think you can recal them?

GRANT.—I think I can, but you will perhaps find the story rather a long one.

CLIFFORD.—Long or short, let us have it by all means. And, let me tell you for your comfort, my good fellow, none of Chaucer's pilgrims could have begun a story under circumstances so favourable. A parliamentary speech itself might have some chance of being listened to if uttered to one whilst passing through so dull a country as this—that is to say, without one's gun and pointers.