

“KILLED BY A BOOK.”



KEEN as is the eye of the gamekeeper, there are parts of the gorse it cannot penetrate ; and sharp though the knife of the forester be, there are numerous little thickets in every woodland which grow up tangled, unpruned, and unguided. So it is with the world generally. No man knows less of the great globe than he who sails all round it.

There are little corners of Wales, little dales of Devonshire, and little islands in the West of Scotland, worlds in themselves, which prove sufficient for the travel of the intelligent student of character, one who finds a parish too big to be explored in a lifetime, let alone complaining of the narrowness of the globe.

One of these little island worlds is Kerra's Isle, in the Western Hebrides. It is not down under that name in the Admiralty chart ; but wandering artists in search of little bits of surf-beaten beach, stray anglers, and some Viking-like yachtsmen, may recognise the place without even “taking soundings.” The hardy men of Kerra could scarcely be called Celts, as their dialect was more Norse than Gaelic. They spoke little English, but what little they did speak was good—“ferra coot” they would say themselves ; and it was “very good.”

One summer evening, as the dying sun was casting its red glow over the bosom of the Atlantic, the people of the little rugged village of the stone huts of B—— were gathered on the edge of the gravel beach in the little bay, which, almost land-locked, afforded protection in stormy weather to the fishing-boats. They were watching a bark that, tack and tack, against the fresh head-breeze, was slowly nearing the land.

“I think, Norman,” said one, “with the sun-down breeze a little free, he should fetch the bay now. He has eased off his sheets, and I can see he is lying more end on.”

“I wish he would get a slant,” said the old man named Norman, with a sigh. “He must know something about a horse. He is a coot judge of a horse.”

"Yes, he has seen more than five horses, besides pownies," said another ; " and he will be able to tell what to give him."

" Oh," groaned another, " but it will be a sore day for us if the horse dies !"

Old Norman's horse was an institution connected with the Island ; it was, indeed, the only horse in Kerra. More than fifteen years previous to the time of our story, Norman and three others brought it from the mainland in the big boat. And what a curiosity it was ! At the time it stood on the shore an awkward yet sprightly colt. The hippopotamus in the Zoological Gardens did not attract more attention when first brought to this country than the colt of Norman from the mainland. But it was ill, and people were afraid they were going to lose him.

" And what will we do at funerals," said one ; " will we have to carry the corpse on the long dark road ?"

" Or at marriages," said another, whose ideas were less gloomy ; " and if the Laird should come this year at the 12th of August to shoot the grouse, what will we do with his boxes and his guns ?"

Indeed, the minds of the people were seriously exercised with the difficulties which presented themselves at the death of old Donald, as he was called. As the folks of Kerra scarcely ever had sickness amongst them—death generally coming amongst the men with a squall at sea—the women of the place generally living till far beyond the threescore and ten—it was natural that they should not know much about veterinary science. According to the complaint, the medicine prescribed was lukewarm salt water or hot whiskey ; while a bowl of tea (for they had found out " the cup that cheers ") was a frequent cause of recovery, more especially when the patients were old women. All of these prescriptions had been tried.

It was a bad case of colic, and the old horse, who had done quite enough of work for his years, was breathing short and thick, as, pained and exhausted, he lay with glazed eye in the rudely constructed stable, the timbers of which, all out of some wrecked barque, made one fancy himself at sea in the roughly polished fore-castle of a North American timber trader.

Soon the bow of Malcolm's boat grated on the gravel shore, and the stout fisherman sprang on to the beach.

"Did he know what to give to Donald? for the poor beast was dying."

But Malcolm confessed that he knew little about how to repair a horse. He could mend a net with any man, or blacken a bladder for a buoy, and if his cobble was strained and leaking he would turn her over on her back and give her a good coat of boiling tar.

"But a horse, no. He had seen more than six horses besides pownies in his day, but he could not say how they were to be made better when they were ill."

"But what have you done to the poor beast, Norman?" said the big fisherman, anxiously.

"We gave him some warm water from the sea," said the old man; "but it did him no coot, no coot whateffer."

"And did you try him with some warm oil?" said Malcolm again.

"Yes, we tried him with some nice warm seal oil," said the old man again, despondingly; "but it was no coot."

"And what else did you do for him?"

"We took the fill of the baling-dish twice of blood out of him," said Norman, with a sigh: "but it was no coot; and then we gave him a coot bottle of whiskey, mixed Long John and Islay, but it is no coot either, and the old horse will die."

"But was there no medicine left by the minister the last time he was here," said Malcolm again; "and was there not a book that the Laird left, which was to help them when the cows were ill?"

"Yes, there was in his own house——"

With a rush the fishermen made for Malcolm's cot, and sure enough there was the book and the medicines. It required the best scholar amongst them to make out from the symptoms what was wrong with Donald, but the case seemed clear enough to be one of colic. The medicines were of the simplest kind, but they had no dram-glasses, and with the quickly-emptied pipe-bowl of Norman's pipe they measured out about an ounce and a half of laudanum and three or four ounces of spirits of turpentine, while another filled out a small jugful of linseed oil. With this mixed up in a bottle, they were soon at Donald's side, and, propping him up with his head in the air, Big Malcolm poured the contents over his throat.

Too late ! alas, too late ! The horse gave one expiring groan and dropped dead at their feet.

Next day they hauled him out on to the beach, and lowered him as tenderly as they would one of their own brethren into his grave. And when they had lowered him, old Norman brought out the book and placed it on his head, while Malcolm emptied, one by one, the bottles containing the medicines.

"He could not have died of the salt water," said one.

"And he could not have died of the tea," said another.

"And the whiskey would have made him petter," said a third.

"Yes, it must have been *what we gave him out of the book*," said Norman. "I never knew no good come out of books."

And there on that stormy beach the leading men of the little island gathered together in conclave, and resolved that all books were dangerous and should be destroyed. Their forefathers had done without books, and why should not they, who made their living in the same perilous manner, also be able to dispense with them ? If they contained good advice they also contained advice which was misleading, so they thought it would be wise to bury them together in one grave. Mrs. Partington like, they were going to stem the great wave of civilisation on their own little bleak island home. So, as the Fiery Cross was carried through the Highland glens in old days, the word passed from hut to hut that everything that was in the shape of print should be taken to the beach and examined. There were not many books in the little place, as there were few who could read English ; but, one by one, they were brought to the lonely shore, and the massacre of the innocents commenced. Volume after volume was looked into by Malcolm and his associates, who reverently and carefully laid aside those in which the Deity was mentioned. Old copies of "Blackwood," left by wandering tourists, were condemned without a dissenting voice ; Hugh Miller, on the "Old Red Sandstone," casually left in the bottom of a boat by an adventurous geologist, was passed with many a crooning wail and shake of the head ; while "Chamber's Information for the People" was "dangerous, ferra dangerous," and condemned at one glance.

And when they had covered the poor old worn-out animal, physicked and bled to death through their own ignorance, they

emptied the shingle into the grave, and covered up all the knowledge which in a casual way—as the wild seed of the mountain flowers are taken from place to place by their adhering to the wings of the ever busy bee—had come to Kerra.

And if any stranger northwards next week after the grouse, or the fine silver-skinned trout which swim the lochs of Kerra-should, as he examines the stone on the beach with the epitaph

“HERE LIES NORMAN MORRISON’S HORSE,”

ask any of the natives what the old horse died of, they will tell you

“HE WAS KILLED BY A BOOK.”

