

CHAP. XVII.

HEATHER-LAND.

Awa' to the Moors! — Heather-land. — Beauty of Heather. — Foreign and native Heaths. — Uses of Heather. — Food and Shelter to Bird and Beast. — Heather Honey. — The Humble-bee. — Heather Beds. — Heather Fuel. — Heather Ale. — Heather Tobacco. — Heather Tracks. — Highland botanical Heraldry. — Heather Heraldry. — Heather pictorially considered. — A Sketcher's Gun and Bag. — An extensive View. — Memories of Heather-land.



SAYS the old Jacobite song, with its *mots à double entente*, —

“ If ye dinna come fast,
The blackcock will flee past,
And nae sport will be left us at a’ ;
Then awa’ to the moors, hilliho,
hilliho ! ”

One could easily obey this order at Glencreggan, for the house was built on the very boundary of the moors, and on the verge of heather-land. Immediately behind the building there was a rock of “ old red sandstone,” covered with heather, and the land arose, with a sharp

pitch, to a sufficient height to shelter the house from the east winds, in which kindly office the young plantations of larch were intended to assist. These plantations, and the corn-fields and meadow-land on either side of them, were bounded by walls of great stones, rudely piled together, and cemented with mud. For the first few hundred yards above the plantations the heather was but scanty, it was mere grazing-ground for cattle, with, here and there, white boulders cropping out from amid the soft herbage, and seeming like a scattered flock of sheep. The rude stone walls were continued here, but at very wide intervals, and soon ceased altogether. Then we began to tread ankle-deep, and more than ankle-deep, in the fragrant heather, its beautiful blossoms dusting our boots and legs with a pinky powder. And soon we were in heather-land, literally knee-deep in heather, and could discover that it was not such very easy walking, and could think of the toil of the grouse-shooters, and Leech's sketch of poor Mr. Briggs prostrate on his back with fatigue, after an hour's exertion on the moors.

We were fortunate in seeing the heather in full blossom and in uncommon luxuriance, and were never wearied of admiring its pleasing harmonies of colour, and its graceful beauties of form. The Highland natives could not understand our foreign ecstasies on such a common subject,—just as the English villagers

could not see what there was in their gorse-bloomed common that could bring Linnæus upon his knees with a thanksgiving to Him who could make flowers so beautiful. But to many an English eye, the first sight of a Highland moor, with the heather in full bloom, would be as novel and beautiful an object as an expanse of green meadows would be to a dweller in the Arctic regions or a snow-storm to a West Indian.

One cannot wonder that so much has been sung and said about the heather, and that poets have decked out “the rustic blushing heath” with so many pretty epithets –

“The flower of the wild,
The hardy mountaineer,
The lonely mountain child.”

Mr. Ruskin has written some wonderful prose on the beauty of grass, and moss, and lichens; how he would handle the heather! A sprig of heather seems to me to be one of the most graceful and beautiful of God’s earth-ornaments. In Scotland it appears to flourish with as much luxuriance as it does at the Cape of Good Hope, though not with equal variety; but in England the Cape and exotic heaths owe half their luxuriance to the ashes of their hardy Highland brethren; because the turfy peat which is so requisite for their propagation is, doubtless, composed of the decayed leaves, and flowers, and stems of the heather,

decomposed by years, and mingled with the natural sandy soil: and it is in this sense that Miss Louisa Twamley, one of the muses attached to Flora's court, has represented Erica, the hardy Highlander, jeering his tender exotic cousin. We read that the great Lord Bacon loved to have the flowers in season set upon his table: if he had been in the Highlands during August and September he would certainly have had, not far from his elbow, a vaseful of heather, with a blue-bell or two for variety.

The fragrance of the heather is particularly pleasing, — a refreshing and aromatic scent, — though its peculiarity is not precisely of that kind indicated in the Scotch songs, where the poet asks —

“O why do those heath-bells, so fresh, and so blooming,
Give fragrance that heath-bells could ne'er give before?”

and explains, that a zephyr having found a young lady asleep in “a bower,” — which would seem to be the resort (in poetry) of all somnolent damsels, — had performed the difficult chemical experiment of “loading his wings with the balm of her breath,” and then, beating retreat by a flight over the moor, had shaken off some of the superfluous balm upon the heather, and thus endued it with a new attraction. But, without going to poetic fiction for this added charm, we may discover it in the scent of those herbs that grow so

profusely among the heather, by which they are overtopped and smothered. The old author of the "Letters from Scotland," tells us how to produce the extra fragrance without any resort to zephyrs and somnolent young ladies. Speaking of a moor he says, "Hither we sometimes retire on a summer evening, and sitting down on the heath we beat with our hands upon the ground, and raise a most fragrant smell of wild thyme, penny-royal, and other aromatic herbs that grow among the heath."

"The heather-balm is fragrant, the heather-bloom is fair,"

says Professor Wilson. But the heather has its use as well as its beauty and fragrance; and, now that we are in heather-land, we may very appropriately call to mind some of the offices that art and nature have combined to make it fulfil. *Imprimis*, — for in the time of grouse this is the leading association connected with the heather, — it is the natural cover for the winged denizens of the moors. The Scotch poet, Graham, makes a touching application of this in his poem of "The Sabbath," though his lines will not diminish the number of game certificates.

"Over their souls

His accents soothing came, as to her young
The heath-fowl's plumes, when, at the close of eve,
She gathers in, mournful, her brood dispersed
By murderous sport, and o'er the remnant spreads

Fondly her wings ; close nestling 'neath her breast
They cherish'd cower amid the purple bloom."

And not only is the heather the natural cover for the winged denizens of the moors, but it is their food also : —

"Flower of the waste ! the heath-fowl shuns
For thee the brake and tangled wood ;
To thy protecting shade she runs,
Thy tender buds supply her food ;
Her young forsake her downy plumes
To rest upon thy opening blooms."

The grouse and black-game feed upon the heather berries and blossoms, and from this derive that peculiar bitter flavour that distinguishes them ; and when the berries and bloom are scarce, they will feed upon the tops of the heather. In winter, the young shoots of the heather are found very serviceable for the food of sheep and cattle. The wild deer makes its bed among the heather, —

"Fit couch of repose for a pilgrim like thee!"

The deer also browse upon it, and, indeed, derive half their subsistence from the heather : —

"Flower of the desert, though thou art !
The deer that range the mountain free,
The graceful doe, the stately hart,
Their food and shelter seek from thee."

The heather is also "a bed for the hare" no less than

for the wild deer. The caterpillar of the oak-egger moth feeds upon the heather leaves, and —

“The bee thy earliest blossom greets,
And draws from thee her choicest sweets.”

The honey, however, thus prepared is darker than the ordinary honey, and derives a peculiar flavour from the heather blossom. Heather-honey mixed with mountain-dew makes Athole-brose; at least so says Christopher North *, whom I take to be a good practical authority on the manufacture and taste of Highland drinks. The same writer thus sings a pœan to the producer of the heather-honey: — “True to thy time, even to a balmy minute, art thou, with thy velvet tunic of black striped with yellow, as thou windest thy small but not sullen horn †, by us called in our pride

* Recreations, vol. ii. p. 137.

† Professor Wilson would seem to be quoting from Collins’s “Ode to Evening,” —

“Or where the beetle winds
His small but sullen horn,”

Clare, in his “Summer Morning,” also speaks of the beetle sounding “his horn;” and Milton, in his “Lycidas,” makes the grey-fly “wind her sultry horn.” The Rev. W. Faber, in his poem of “The Contrast,” says: —

“And by the tiny trumpet of the bees
Was I well soothed.”

And Spenser speaks of the “murmuring small trumpets” of gnats. The expressive word “booming,” which Professor Wilson uses for the

humble-bee; but not, methinks, so very humble, while booming high in air in oft-repeated circles, as if the smell of some far-off darling heather-bed had touched thy finest instinct; away thou fliest straight southward to that rich flower-store, unerringly as the carrier-pigeon wafting to distant lands some love-message on its wings. Yet humble after all thou art; for, all day long, making thy industry thy delight, thou returnest at shut of day, cheerful even in thy weariness, to thy ground-cell within the knoll, where, as fancy dreams, the fairies dwell, a silent people in the land of peace."*

This is poetry in prose; here follows, on the same subject, by the same author, a scrap of poetry in rhyme:—

“Mid the flowers of the heath, not more bright than himself,
 The wild bee is busy, a musical elf—
 Then starts from his labour, unwearied and gay,
 And, circling the antlers, booms far, far away.”†

Thus the heather provides sustenance to bird, beast, and insect.

Of course, too, many winged diners-out beside the grouse tribe find food, as well as shelter, from the heather; while, as for the Highlander's bothie, what would it be without the heather? Mixed with earth,

humble-bee, has been applied by Howitt to the cockchafer; and by Scott, Crabbe, and Ebenezer Elliott to the bittern.

* Recreations, vol. ii. p. 48.

† Address to a Wild Deer.

it forms its walls; it also helps to thatch the bothie, and a dry heap of it makes the beds. This is an old custom of heather-land. Dr. Johnson speaks of it; and Martyn, a century and a half ago, says of the Highlanders: "They lie for the most part on beds of straw, and some on beds of heath, which latter, being made after their way, with the tops uppermost, are almost as soft as a feather-bed. It yields a pleasant scent after lying on it once, and is very refreshing after a fatigue of any kind." * Lord Somers had made an earlier mention of it: "In their houses they lye upon the ground, laying betwixt them and it, *brakens*, or *hadder*, the roots thereof downe, and the tops up, so prettily layed together, that they are as soft as feather-beds, and much more wholesome; for the tops themselves are drye of nature, whereby it dryes the weake humours and restores againe the strength of the sinewes troubled before; and that so evidently, that they who at evening go to rest sore and weary, rise in the morning whole and able." † So that "the bed of health" is, after all, a bed of heath.

Mixed with peat, the heather makes excellent fuel for boiling the gudewife's kettle in many a mountain shieling: and this custom also may be traced to a considerable antiquity. The Highland hunting-feasts

* Western Highlands, p. 196.

† Lord Somers's "Tracts," vol. iii. p. 388.

in olden time were thus prepared. The venison, or meat to be cooked, was laid in a pit lined with stones heated by *heath*. The venison was laid on this, then more hot stones, then more venison, and so on, in alternate layers, until the pit was full. The whole was then covered over with heath to confine the steam.

The weaver of plaids extracts a yellow dye from the heather, and the drinker brews from it a liquid called heather-ale. Here again we are taken back to ancient days; for Boece's "Chronicles" tell us that heather-ale was known to the Picts. The legend runs that Kenneth MacAlpine slew all the Picts but two, a father and his son, who possessed the recipe for brewing the heather nectar, and were spared on condition that they should disclose the secret. The father promised to do so if he were granted one boon. This was agreed to. The boon was, that his son should be killed! his head was accordingly struck off. "Now," said the father, "I am satisfied. My son might have taught you the art, but I never will." And he carried it to his grave: and the ballad tells us, —

"The Picts were undone, cut off, mother's son,
For not teaching the Scots to brew heather-ale!"

another of those historical points which may be classed among the things not generally known. Mr. Weld, who tells the foregoing legend, adds: "I have read, however, that although the art of brewing the Pictish

heather-ale is lost, old grouse shooters have tasted a beverage prepared by shepherds on the moors, principally from heather flowers, though honey or sugar, to produce fermentation, was added.”* Was it Athole-brose?

Garnett, in his “Tour,” † tells us of the heath-peasling (*Orobus tuberosus*), which grows in great abundance among the heather, and says: “It has purple papilionaceous flowers, succeeded by a pod containing about twelve dark-coloured seeds resembling small shot. The roots of this plant, when boiled, are very savoury and nutritious; and when dried and ground into powder, may be made into bread. The Highlanders frequently chew the root like tobacco, asserting that a small quantity prevents the uneasy sensations of hunger.”

And, while thus writing on the various uses of the heather, I must not forget a remarkable instance where it was made the first step in the ladder to fame Well

* Two Months in the Highlands, p. 83. Macculloch denies that there ever was such a beverage as heather-ale; though he says that the flowers of the heath may have been added to the malt for the purpose of giving it flavour. (Vol. iii. p. 333.) Osiris is said to have taught the Britons the art of making beer. Pennant, in his “Voyage to the Hebrides,” p. 229, mentions the heather-ale, and says that the proportions were two-thirds of the plant to one of malt, hops being sometimes added.

† Garnett’s “Tour,” vol. i. p. 337.

nigh a century ago an old shepherd in Galloway taught one of his lads his letters by scoring them with a *burnt heather stem* on the back of a wool card. That boy lived to be Dr. Alexander Murray, the celebrated linguist, Professor of Oriental Literature in the University of Edinburgh, and was applied to by the Marquis of Wellesley as the only person in the British dominions who could translate a letter written by an Eastern potentate to the King of England.

Thus the heather has many uses, and has had still more. For, when pressed by the foot, it retains the impression for a considerable time before it rises again to its former position; so that when a *creach*, or great expedition was made against a neighbour's cattle, their owner, on the discovery of the raid, would track his stolen kyloes through the heather with all the skill of a Red Indian on a trail. We are told that they could thus track them for scores of miles, and, with surprising skill, discriminate between the tracks of their own cattle and those that were casually wandering or being driven upon the hills. The foe and the runaway were in the same manner tracked by their footsteps upon the heather. Thus the heather provides food and shelter for bird, beast, and insect; and is of assistance to man for food and drink, for fuel, for architecture, for bedding, and for many useful purposes. Well, therefore, does this friend to the Highlander merit all

the honours that could be paid to it. Accordingly we find that there is a heraldry of heather, and that this humble plant figures as the badge of many a family proud of their high lineage.

Scotch heraldry largely draws upon botany. Many of the Highland clans adopted badges from flowers, shrubs, and trees, commonly from evergreens, selected probably on the "*sans changer*" principle. The royal Stuarts, however, were an exception to this: they wore the oak, which, from its being deciduous, was regarded by many as a fatal emblem of the decay of their family and name. The Camerons also "sported the oak," and sometimes the crowberry. The Macgregors adopted the pine as their badge; the Buchanans, the birch; the Frasers, the yew; the Macdougalls, the cypress; the Maclachlans, the mountain-ash; the Lamonds, the crab-apple tree; the Macphersons and Mackintoshes, the boxwood; the Campbells, the myrtle, or fir-club moss; the Robertsons, the fern, or "brackens;" the Macfarlanes, the cloudberry bush; the Drummonds, the plain holly, or wild thyme; the Mackenzies, the variegated holly, or deer-grass*; the Macleods, the red whortleberry; the Forbes, the broom; the Mackays,

* The deer-grass was in allusion to their armorial bearings, a deer's head and horns. The reason for this crest being assumed will be found by referring to Stewart's "Sketches of Highland Regiments," vol. ii. p. 196.

the bullrush; the Gordons, the ivy; the Cummins, the cummin-wood; the Rosses, the wild rosemary; the Sinclairs, the clover; the Macleans, the crowberry; the Macneills (of Barra and Gigha), the sea-ware; the Grahams and Stewarts, the thistle.

As this was the case, we might be sure that in heather-land the heath would receive due heraldic honours. Thus, the Macdonells chose as their badge the common heath (*Calluna vulgaris*); the Macdonalds, the cross-leaved heath (*Erica tetralix*); the Macallisters, the three-belled, or the fine-leaved heath (*Erica cinerea*); the Macleans, the blackberry heath; and the Grants, the cranberry heath.*

But many a leal Scot who cannot boast of clanship with Macdonalds or Macallisters, is proud to place in his bonnet a sprig of mountain heather, as a fair emblem of the charms of his native land, and a badge of himself, "the hardy mountaineer."

How we prize our little clumps of heath in our gardens and conservatories! and when one sees the full-blossomed heather stretching for miles and miles on every side, and can stand in it, and walk through it, and inhale its delicious fragrance, and note its various tints, from a dim purple, through all the shades of lilac, to a creamy pink and brightest crimson, —

* The two last badges are mentioned in Skene's "Highlanders," vol. ii. p. 118.

“ Sometimes with bells like amethysts, and then
 Paler, and shaded like the maiden’s cheek
 With gradual blushes ; other while as white
 As rime that hangs upon the frozen spray,” —

these varied hues spread over the wide landscape, varying according to distance or slope of the ground ; a dull purple in the shade, a bright pink or flesh-colour in the sun, and mingled with the cooler shades of green, from the dark hue of the feathery heather stem, to the lighter brackens and emerald-green patches of grass, — Oh ! how rich a treat it is to see all this, with the bright sky overhead, and the pure keen mountain air and sea-breeze invigorating the frame and bracing the mind to a healthier enjoyment and keener perception of the beautiful. Beautiful indeed it is :

“ Oh there is sweetness in the mountain air ! ”

says Byron. Let us rest here awhile on the summit of this hill,

“ Stained with heather like bloody foot-prints ; ” *

and, leaning back against this great boulder, look out from its grateful shade upon heather-land, the

“ Land struck with brightest sun-tints ; ”

its “ dark purple moors,” and “ sleek ocean-floors,” and all the varied beauty of this Western Highland scene.

* Alexander Smith.

The view is very varied, and embraces land and water. From this Glencreggan moor we have not only Gonzalo's "thousand furlongs of sea," but we have also the "long heath and brown furze" for which he longed in vain. There is the broad Atlantic, yonder is the Irish coast, and here are the Southern Hebrides clustering so gracefully; our lofty position enables us now to overlook them, and to see the ocean upon their further side. Away to the right are the shadowy mountains of Mull, where

"Through his thin scarf of mist,
Ben More to the sun heaves his wet shining shoulders;"

and the height to which he heaves them is 3170 feet above the Atlantic level. Then, turning our backs upon the Atlantic, we look over the rugged peaks of Arran, and the island of Bute, and towards that tumultuous sea of mountains whose highest wave is Ben Lomond.

But, looking nearer afield, here are abundant objects for seeing and admiring. To begin with the heather, what says "Nature's sternest painter, yet her best?"

"This gay ling, with all its purple flowers,
A man at leisure might admire for hours;
And then, how fine this herbage! Man may say
A heath is barren; nothing is so gay!"

Gay indeed it is. Burns speaks of

“Auld Coila’s plain and fells,
Her moors red-brown wi’ heather bells;”

and, on this bright August day, this “red-brown” is varied with numberless tints of pink and purple, in a manner which I quickly discover to be by no means easy to represent with the paint-brush. For I have wandered out upon these Glencreggan moors to bag other game than those whose slaughter is limited to the interval between the twelfth of August and the tenth of December. I am no shot, and have a woman-like antipathy to slay “the pretty birdies.” (N.B. not the slightest objection to eat them when killed by others!) So my gun is my pencil, and my bag my sketch-book, and while the other Glencreggan guests are enjoying their sport, I, within hearing of their guns, enjoy myself more quietly after my own fashion, and say with Iago,

“Myself the while will draw the Moor apart.” *

The while I draw this moor, a broken sprig of heather blossom has been blown upon my moist-colour box, and lies embedded on the cake of emerald green which the hot sun has softened. Since then a twelvemonth has elapsed, and the heather blossom is still there; and as I open the colour box and see those pretty pink and

* Othello, Act ii. Scene 3.

white bells hung upon their delicate spray, they ring out to me pleasant memories of heather-land, and I am tempted to address them in the words of Campbell: —

“I love you for lulling me back into dreams
Of the blue Highland mountains and echoing streams,
And of birchen glades breathing their balm.”

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.