

CHAP. XXV.

ON THE ATLANTIC SHORE.

Mushrooms and Sea Air. — Beallachghaochan Cave. — A Mountain Stream. — By the sad Sea Waves. — Receding of the Sea. — Detached Rocks. — Their geological Character. — Their botanical Character. — The Blue Bell of Scotland — Its distinctive Marks. — Hairbell or Harebell. — A Spot for a Pic Nic. — Kelp Gatherers. — Manufacture of Kelp. — Wraic. — The Kelp Harvest. — Value of a Kelp Shore. — Wraic in Jersey. — Hard Work. — Herrings and Wraic.

A FIVE minutes' walk from Glencreggan brings us to the seashore and within the splash of the Atlantic breakers. Our shortest way would be across the down-like fields, and to scramble down the cliffs. If we follow this course we shall find evidences that would convict a late Saturday Reviewer of a mistake. "Mosses and mushrooms," said he, "shrink from the sea air." Here, nevertheless, are mushrooms in profusion, scattered all over the grassy downs, up to the very verge of the cliffs, and thriving in the Atlantic sea air. And very excellent were they, as the Glencreggan breakfast-table enabled us to testify. They shrank no more from the sea air

at Glencreggan, than they do on the Freshwater downs.

But our best way to the beach, and, in the end, the most expeditious, is to follow the high road for a short distance to the right. Since this road left Barr Village, it has traversed the cliffs at a considerable elevation above the sea, and at a distance of about a quarter of a mile from the shore. Shortly after passing Glencreggan, the road is carried over a mountain stream that comes from the hills through a little glen planted with larch and fir, and passes in front of a miserable farmhouse. When the road has crossed the stream, it winds suddenly and sharply seawards down a steep descent, and round the face of a rock, which is the spur of the hills that follow the crescent shape of the shore towards the village of Meusdale. The high-road winds down to the shore, and thus continues, with but few intermissions, all the way to Tarbert, a distance of twenty-six miles.*

The rock I have just mentioned stands boldly out above the road, and in its base is a large cave, called Beallachaghaochan—for thus the name was spelt to me by a Gaelic scholar. Ballochagoichan it is called in Mr. Keith Johnstone's map of Cantire; and Bealach-a'-

* "Dine at a tolerable house at Barr, visit the great cave of Bealach-a'-chaochain near the shore, embark in a rotten leaky boat," &c. — *Hebrides*, p. 197.

chaochain by Pennant, who mentions it in the only sentence that he devotes to that portion of Cantire between Campbelton and Tarbert. The Rev. D. Macdonald, in his account of the parish, writes the word Bealochachaochean; another proof of the difficulty that there is in arriving at correctness in spelling the names of remote places in the Highlands. This cave contains a spring of excellent water, without any visible outlet.

The mountain stream, that I have mentioned, passes under the high-road at a depth of six or eight feet, and dashes down its ravine, whose rocky sides are lavishly hung with ferns and adorned with heather and wild flowers. It comes on musically towards the sea, dancing down its water-breaks and "depth of flowery shelves," and is in itself so beautiful an object that we long to transport it bodily to a certain garden in a far-off English county, where it would receive the daily homage of admiration, instead of wasting its sweetness on this desert air, where it has a thousand rivals in the thousand

"Wild brooks babbling down the mountain side."

A rough cart-road follows the side of this stream, and conducts us down to Bealachaghaochan Port, and Bay.

In a sheltered nook under the sea-wall of cliff a rude boat-house has been constructed, and here the

cobles or fishing-boats are run up in rough and stormy weather. At present they are down on the beach; not quite high and dry though, for the faint waves that “o’ercreep the rigid sand”

“Tap the tarry boat with gentle blow,
And back return in silence, smooth and slow;”

as they did when Crabbe, the Parson Poet, watched them on the Suffolk shore. Two children are at idlesse in the boat, pulling up ropes and chains,—throwing stones at the gulls as they dart down upon the waves and rise and fall “like floating foam,”—and singing merrily all the time, like Tennyson’s fisherman’s boy shouting with his sister at play, while the sea breaks over the cold grey stones.

We are now upon the Atlantic shore. Let us turn to the left towards Barr Village and Glenacardoch Point. On our left hand rise the grassy cliffs, here and there scarped with rock. Over the waves on our right, are Islay and Jura, with their satellites.

“The gentleness of heaven is on the sea.
Listen! the mighty Being is awake,
And doth with His eternal motion make
A sound like thunder everlastingly.”

The beach is rough with rocks of varied form and size, between whose fragments “the cruel, crawling foam” leaves its white patches. Not only here, but for

the distance of several miles along the coast, there is a strip of greensward (in some places cultivated) between the cliffs and the sea, which has been thus described :—
“ In the immediate vicinity of the sea a narrow stripe of low alluvial land, edged by an indented declivity, bears evident traces of having at one period been occupied by the sea. The general belief among the aged inhabitants is, that the sea is gradually retiring from the land. In confirmation of this belief, the bank or sloping declivity which forms the boundary of the level land occasionally assumes a shelving appearance, and in such places as the sea has encountered obstruction from projecting precipitous rocks, they have formed an irresistible barrier against any encroachment of the ocean; but, where no such interruption occurs, the waves seem to have forced a passage farther inland. Along the shore the remains of some rude circular inclosures are still visible, which, from their appearance and position, must have been at one period surrounded by the sea.”*

On the Atlantic shore, underneath Glencreggan, from Beallachaghaochan Port to Glenacardoch Point, this strip of alluvial soil is not cultivated, but remains a greensward. It is evident from the nature of the ground, which resembles the Undercliff at the Isle of

* The Rev. D. Macdonald's "Statistical Account of the Parish of Killean."

Wight, that landslips must have occurred at some remote period; and, scattered over the soft turf, are detached masses of rock, from twenty to fifty feet high, and of varying dimensions, which have doubtless been dislodged from the rocky ramparts above, and are now set up on the green sward, like so many Titanic nine-pins. It is at this portion of the western coast of Cantire, according to Macculloch's geological map *, that the secondary red sandstone touches upon the micaceous schist; though the leading geological features only are marked in his map, and the small local details are necessarily omitted. Hugh Miller has described similarly-placed rocks occurring at a more northern part of the western coast of Argyleshire. At the feet of the conglomerate cliffs "there stretches out a grassy lawn, which sinks with a gradual slope into the existing sea-beach, but which ages ago must have been a sea-beach itself. We see the bases of the precipices hollowed and worn, with all their rents and crevices widened into caves; and mark, at a picturesque angle of the rock, what must have been once an insulated sea-stack, some thirty or forty feet in height, standing up from amid the rank grass, as at one time it stood up from amid the waves. Tufts of fern and sprays of ivy bristle from its sides, once roughened by the serrated

* Description of the Western Islands of Scotland, vol. iii. p. 63. See Appendix, "Geology of Cantire."

kelp-weed and the tangle. It owes its existence as a stack — for the precipice in which it was once included has receded from around it for yards — to an immense boulder in its base, by far the largest stone I ever saw in an old red conglomerate.” He had previously not seen any that weighed more than two hundred weight, and he comes to the conclusion that these detached rocks were the sport of the fierce Atlantic tempests, which had been the rough agents in moving them to their present position.*

On every little rocky ledge and coign of vantage of these Titanic ninepins there is a mingled mass of moss, and fern, and wild thyme, and heather, and wild flowers, worked into one of those mosaics of nature of which Horace Smith says: —

“Ye bright mosaics! that, with storied beauty,
The floor of nature’s temple tessellate.”

The botany of these rocks on the Glencreggan shore comprises the sea-cale, marine holly, crane-bill geranium, creeping convolvulus, scarlet poppy, starwort, rose campion, St. John’s wort, musk rose, bog pimpernel, sea bind-weed, scurvy grass, maiden hair, celadine, and others; while ivy clothes portions of the rocks with its evergreen mantle.

Nor must we forget the Blue Bell of Scotland, which is the heath-bell, or harebell (*Campanula rotundi-*

* Cruise of the Betsey, pp. 7, 9.

flora), a very different plant from the English harebell (*Scilla nutans*), dedicated to St. George, which has a thick, soft, brittle, hollow stem, while that of the Scotch harebell is as wiry and supple as a very Scotsman ;

“Red-haired, high-cheek'd, sly, *supple*, and a Scot,”

says *the New Timon*, in summing up the northern characteristics ; and suppleness is a distinguishing mark of the Blue Bell of Scotland. No English harebell would ever have

“raised its head
Elastic from her airy tread,”

if Ellen Anyone had planted her foot upon it, notwithstanding the poetical fact that

“A foot more light, a step more true,
Ne'er from the heath-flower dash'd the dew.”

The darker flower that, from its reflex leaves, gave to Homer and Milton alike the simile of “hyacinthine locks,” loves shady and sequestered dells ; while the paler cærulean flower delights in open, windy places such as this, where the wild blasts of the Atlantic breezes blow over it and hurt it not. Many poets have confused this point, drawing no distinction between the two flowers.* But Shakspeare, like Scott, studied

* “In the lone copse, or shading dell,
Wild cluster'd knots of harebells blow.”

Charlotte Smith.

nature out of doors, and was a too close and pious observer of her wonders and beauties not to note the distinctive characteristics of the two flowers, and he compares Imogen's veins to the "azured harebell." * Perhaps the word ought to be written *hairbell*, and the name derived from the bell-like flowers depending from the wiry hair-like stalk; whence Tennyson calls it "the *frail* harebell." But books give us a different etymology, and tell us that it is called harebell because it grows in places frequented by hares. Yet out here on these Titanic nine-pin rocks, set up on end on this stretch of green sward by the Atlantic shore, even the mountain hares would find it somewhat difficult to gain a footing on those tiny ledges and crevices, —

"Where blue bells and heather
Are blooming together." †

Burns speaks of the "little harebells o'er the lea," and there, indeed, the hares might sport among them; but these detached rocks are, for the most part, inaccessible even to the nimble Highland hares. The wealth of wild flowers lavished upon these lovely rocks reminded us of similarly garnished rocks in the most luxuriant part of that most luxuriant district between Bonchurch and Niton; but with this difference, — in which the

* Cymbeline, Act iv. Scene 2.

† Robert Nichol.

Highlands had the superiority over the Isle of Wight,—that here at Glencreggan the rocks had the additional charm of clumps of flowering heather. Mr. “Dirty-boy” Hunt once painted for Mr. Ruskin a tiny picture, into which he had conjured “a bit of Mont Blanc.”* What a full subject would one of these lovely rocks at Glencreggan form for Hunt to paint, and Ruskin to word-paint!

Here is a charming spot for a picnic. These detached rocks, scattered over the grassy sward, divide it into a series of natural rooms, all of which, in the language of marine advertisements, “command an excellent sea-view,” though they fulfil this promise much better than do the advertisements, the sea-view of which is frequently a glimpse over and between your neighbour’s chimneys. But here “there is no mistake;” here is the Atlantic rolling in to our very feet and wetting us with its spray; and as we gaze straight before us still we see the Atlantic, and nothing but the Atlantic. We could certainly picnic here with vast success. In this room, “with rock-wall encircled,” with the soft velvet turf for our carpet, the blue sky overhead, the sea before us, the heather and wild flowers perfuming the air, and the grassy cliffs rising sharply behind us to shut us out of sight of any inquisitive passers-by,—here would we dine

* One of the series painted for Mr. Ruskin, to be presented to Schools of Art.

in *al fresco* freedom. In the next space close by us, but shut out from our view by the rocky wall of our dining-room, the servants could have their relays of plates and eatables, and could carry on all needful preparations; while on the other side of us is a famous ball-room, in front of which the sea is even now advancing and retreating, and challenging us to come unto its yellow sands, and nimbly foot it "in dances and delight."

However, we are on a ramble now, and are not prepared for a picnic. Let us walk on nearer to Glencardoch Point, towards those fires upon the beach, from whence are rising tall columns of smoke, like so many cloudy pillars,—and see what the people are doing there. There is a horse and cart, men attending to fires, and women wading in the sea.

The scene is in one of the little bays immediately in front of Glencreggan, looking across to Islay, and over the Atlantic in the direction of America. The cliffs rise on our left, sweep round to an acute angle in Glencardoch Point, and then recede towards Barr. Below the cliffs is a strip of greenest grass, strewn with the richly-flowered boulders; then the buff line of sand and shingle; then a dark and confused mass of half-sunken rocks, thickly bestrewn with sea-wrack. It is low water, and they lift up their heads from the waves like sea-giantesses, their hair hanging over their heads



KELP-GATHERING ON THE WESTERN COAST OF CANTIRE.

wet and dank with salt water. These long tresses, rippling and glistening as the waves, are being plucked from the rocks by veritable bare-legged women, dressed in their oldest clothes tucked up to the knees; who,



KELP GATHERERS.

when they have gathered a lapful, carry it to the shore, or lay it in heaps upon the rocks, from whence it will be transferred to the cart. The kelp-cart is made to perform many journeys backwards and forwards from

the half-sunken rocks to the shore; and the horse plunges through the breakers and up the loose shingle, scattering the bright wave-drops from him at every plunge, while his driver freely uses the whip and screams at him in Gaelic horse talk. Two other men attend to the fires, turning over the heaps of smouldering kelp, and keeping them in a blaze within their circles of stones, or in shallow pits, while the columns of smoke go up like beacon-fires and are answered by hundreds of others along the coast, until one might imagine that the Highlands were up in arms once more and the signal for the gathering of the clans had been given.

Although the manufacture of kelp has somewhat declined in Cantire, yet it is still of considerable importance, and forms the chief part of the livelihood of many families. Kelp is an article manufactured from the ashes of sea-weed, — or rather, I should say, from the sea-wrack, or *wraic*, or sea-ware (also called “tangles” in Cantire) which, I believe, is not classed among that vegetation of the sea, called *sea-weeds*. Every visitor to the coast knows its long shiny leaves like tangles of crumpled ribbons, with its little bladders of iodine, which, when well rubbed on to the skin, afford so much benefit in strengthening weak limbs. Of this *wraic* the *Fucus saccharinus* and *digitatus* is chiefly used for manure; the *Fucus vesiculosus*, or “cut-weed” was considered the best for soda, though now rarely

used for this purpose, as soda is chiefly manufactured from sea-salt; and the *Laminaria*, *Nodosus* (out of which the Highland lads make whistles), and *Serratus*, or "drift-weed," was reserved for the iodine. Thus medicine and art (photography) derive one of their most valuable chemicals from this sea-weed; for, whether strictly and algologically correct or no, yet sea-weed we may still call it; and, in Gaelic, kelp is *Luath feamnach*, "the ashes of sea-weed." What the word *kelp* means etymologists don't seem to know.

The kelp harvest lasts from June to September. The value of a kelp shore is so variable and uncertain, that it can scarcely be stated with any approximate correctness. It is regulated by its extent, by the interval between high and low water mark, and by the nature of the rocks. The market price of the article fluctuates; it has ranged from 2*l.* per ton, early in the last century up to as much as 20*l.* per ton, the price it fetched for a short time early in the present century, when the importation of foreign Barilla* was checked. The Kelp of the Orkneys was superior to that of the Hebrides, and greatly used in the manufacture of plate-glass, and it would fetch 10*l.* per ton, while that of the Western Islands (used in the preparation of soap) would only fetch five. But again, the kelp of Colan-

* Barilla is a Spanish name given to the ashes of several species of the genera *Salicornia*, *Salsola*, *Suaeda*, *Chenopodina*, and their allies.

say and Oransay — partly from the intrinsic excellence of the weed, and partly from the superior method of preparing it — could compete with the best *glass* kelp of the Orkneys. During the season of 1859 the average price for kelp near to Glencreggan was 6*l.* the ton. About a sixth of the sum is paid as a royalty to the Lord of the Manor, for permission to cut and gather the sea-weed. It takes an average of twenty-four tons of weed to every ton of kelp; and as the production of kelp for the whole of the Highlands was last year estimated at about twelve thousand tons (exclusive of the Orkneys, and other portions of Scotland), some idea may be gained of the magnitude of the traffic and the importance of this weed. Glass, soap, soda, carbonate of soda, muriate of potass, but more especially iodine, are the chief articles in whose manufacture the sea-wraic is used: and it is anything but the *alga inutilis* of Horace.

In France it is called *varech*, and in the Channel Islands, *vraic*, where it is largely used for fuel and manure. So important is it for the latter purpose, that there is a Guernsey proverb *Point de vraic, point de hautgard*. “No sea-weed, no corn-stacks.” The times of the *vraic* harvest are regulated by the local authorities, and the sea-weed can only be gathered under municipal restrictions. “So violent is the scramble between the contending parties,” says Sir George Head,

“that peace officers are summoned at the harvest, or gathering. A day twice in each year is set apart for this ceremony, when neighbour against neighbour, in brute strength and rivalry, contend fiercely for this tribute of the ocean. Persons of all ages, of different denominations and sexes, wives, maids, and widows, married men and bachelors, leave and licence by the proper authorities being given, may be seen striving together indiscriminately in the fury of competition, and each anxious to possess him or herself of more varech than the other, if not absolutely quarrelling and fighting, at least tousling and tumbling one another up to their middles in water.”* As in the Highlands, there is a difference in the kinds of *vraic*; that which is cut or scraped from the rock, and called *vraic scie*, being considered much superior to that washed ashore by the tide, and called *vraic venant*. In Guernsey alone, the value of the yearly yield of *vraic* is upwards of three thousand pounds.

Macculloch, in speaking of the value of the kelp-shores on the western coast of Scotland, says, “that an island was pointed out to him, which was then worth to the lessee two thousand pounds a year, but had been let on a long lease to his ancestors at forty pounds —

* Home Tour in the United Kingdom, p. 172. For further particulars, see Barbet's “Guernsey Guide,” Inglis's “Channel Islands,” and Plee's “Account of Jersey.”

the value of the kelp having made the difference." The kelp at Glencreggan found its chief market at Glasgow. When it is considered that twenty-four tons of seaweed have to be gathered, and burnt, and conveyed to market, before the value of one ton of kelp can be obtained; and that the sea-wrack can only be obtained in certain places, under certain conditions, and at a certain time of day and period of the year,—we may easily conceive that the money is hardly earned. As kelp-gathering necessitates the keeping of at least one horse and cart, it is usual for the farmers to rent the kelp-shores, and employ certain of their labourers in the work. The expense of cutting, gathering, drying, burning, &c., is estimated at from three to four pounds per ton.

I am permitted to make use of the following interesting note, received from a Government official in the Falkland Isles. "Kelp is as near of kin to Rams-gate sea-weed as a Canadian forest is to the widow Mac Cormack's cabbages. Imprimis—Kelp cannot grow between 'wind and water;' it is always planted below low tide. It grows to the height of 30 or 40 feet, with a clear stem or trunk of 3 to 4 feet in girth, the leaves 7 feet long and a foot broad, and lying on the surface for miles along the coast, and at times for half a mile through, presenting the most complete and unconquerable breakwater that the world contains. The

largest and most ruffled waves of the wild seas where it grows become tame and smooth as they traverse this barrier, and leave their surge and curls behind it, while the water beneath is always glassy and oily, no matter what wind. I have seen porpoises for hours playing through these sea-groves, and the seals and sea-lions are at home in them, like deer in a forest. But to men, the kelp is a true Siren. Nothing but a long acquaintance with the various colours that the kelp presents, as the wind, and air, and sun, and water, and underlying rocks and sands affect it, can give a sense of its beauty! But a man cannot get away from it — its long arms encumber him, and drag him down. I have in my mind at this moment, two men who threw away their lives while trying to struggle through only a few yards of kelp; the one, a captain of a fine Flemish barque, who, his ship breaking up on the rocks, tried, with a lead line in his mouth, to wear through the few yards of kelp and water that lay between his ship and the shore and could not; and he was seen to go down by the only man of twenty-three who escaped that morning." The "kelp" here referred to (though properly speaking the kelp is not the weed, but the manufactured article) is evidently different from that gathered on the Scotch coasts. This South American "kelp" may perhaps have been the *Sargassum bacciferum*, or gulf-weed, whose matted cords of old stopped

the Spanish ships, and drifting masses of which form into floating islands, dreaded by sailors. This beautiful species is to be found on the West Highland coasts, whither it has been borne by the gulf stream. Or, this South American "kelp" may be of the *Laminaria* or *Chorda* species, which grow to a height of 40 and 50 feet, and will stop the course of a ship's boat, and drown hapless swimmers by twining round their legs.

In many cases, the manufacture of kelp in the Western Highlands was voluntarily abandoned, as it was supposed to drive away the herring from that part of the coast where it was carried on. This, however, was a mere vulgar error, invented in order to account for the erratic propensities of the fish. The women whom I sketched assured me that kelp-gathering was a very sorry subsistence; and that they often got back home too tired to change their wet and dripping clothes. Emigration has already been very largely carried on from the Western Highlands and Islands, chiefly to America and Australia. Dr. Livingstone's brother, writing from Central Africa, advocates a new field. "I wish," he says, "we had a few hundred good industrious Scotch families on these fertile Highlands. Instead of, as at home, toiling for a bare subsistence, here they could cultivate largely sugar, cotton, &c., benefit

the natives by their example, and furnish materials for our manufactures at home."

Assuredly some of the "common objects on the sea-shore" at Glencreggan, who work so laboriously and live so poorly, might do a good service in Dr. Livingstone's mission-field; though if the fisheries off the Cantire coast were better attended to than they are, there would be the less need for emigration.

And this leads me to consider some few common objects both on, and off, the sea-shore at Glencreggan, which I will class in a chapter by themselves.