

LOCHANDHU.

CHAPTER I.

Prythee, see there ! behold ! look ! lo ! how say you ?

Macbeth.

Dentro la porta ando, ch' adito dava

Ne la seconda assai più larga cava.

La stanza quadra, e spaziosa pare.

— — — — —
E quello di splendente, e chiaro foco

Rendea gran lume a l'uno, e a l'altro loco.

ARIOSTO.

ABOUT fifty years ago, on a delightful evening in June, when the soft summer sky was reflected from the bosom of a calm sea, a gay pleasure yacht, of about sixty tons burden, was sailing along the bold coast defending the entrance of one of those numerous friths, indenting the north-east of Scotland. Whilst several ships, in the distance, lay almost motionless, like specks

amidst the clear grey shadow, that, deepening into an intense blue, was gradually settling over the face of the ocean, a gentle breeze filled her white canvas, and kept her gaudy streamers on the stretch. She seemed, indeed, to have wooed and won the favouring zephyr exclusively to herself; for, as is often the case with such light winds, it blew partially over a narrow stripe of the water in her course, producing a slight rippling line along the surface, and lifting, as it passed onwards, a thousand wavelets to be gilded by the declining beams of a glorious sunset.

Having kept a little off shore to clear a bold headland, she tacked, stood in for the lovely little bay it protected, and then dropped her anchor within its sheltered amphitheatre, where the lofty and precipitous wall of surrounding rock promised perfect safety from every blast.

A small boat, fancifully painted, was now lowered from her side, and pushed off for the beach, that formed a broad shelving pebbly margin between the sea and the base of the cliffs. It was rowed by six seamen, uniformly dressed in blue jackets and white trowsers, and having leathern caps on their heads, with the word

“Dasher” emblazoned in large letters of gold on their fronts. It was steered by a bulky, and rather elderly man, wearing something resembling the undress costume of a naval captain of the day, and whose hardy countenance, rusted by the action of various climates, displayed a certain air of habitual command. In the bow sat a young man wrapped up in a large boat-cloak, who, as soon as the prow touched the land, jumped actively ashore, and throwing his cumbersome covering to a servant, exhibited a tall handsome person, clad in a green hunting dress, peculiarly calculated to display his finely-proportioned figure. On his head he wore an upright cap of dark brown fur, decorated by a broad and rich gold band, and his luxuriantly curled black hair and whiskers gave shade to his fair, untarnished, yet manly face; as the perfect arch of his ample eyebrows added to the beauty and nobleness of his forehead, and gave fire to his large, full, and intelligent eyes. In his hand he held a Spanish gun, of rare and curious workmanship, and his shoulders were belted with the apparatus of a sportsman. A light couteau-de-chasse hung by his side from a

belt of green velvet, ornamented with gold, and his companion, who landed with somewhat less agility, was armed with a large cutlass, depending from a broad belt of black leather.

“ Well, Amherst Oakenwold, my boy !” said the elder stranger to his friend, slapping him familiarly on the shoulder as he spoke, “ here we are in canny Scotland ! Have I not been as good as my word ? Have I not whistled you from the Downs hither in first-rate style, and hasn’t the little Dasher done her duty ?—What a thing for lying near the wind !—never was there a better put together parcel of planks !—I’ll be bound to steer her all round the world and back again, without starting a single timber.”

“ I must admit, Cleaver,” replied the other, stretching himself, and moving his limbs, as if delighted to escape from the confinement to which he had for some days been subjected, “ that your little yacht is the perfection of pleasure vessels, and yourself the most expert, the steadiest, and the boldest of captains ; nor will I now deny that you have a perfect right to exercise all that despotic control you are wont

to insist upon as your prerogative when on board."

"Despotic control! Aye, what the devil would you expect from me?—Would you have a crew without a head, or with no harder a head than a boiled turnip?—or, what is worse, would you have as many heads as a boatswain's cat has tails?—No, no, that would never do; lubber or landsman, order and obey is the word with me when I walk my quarter-deck, be it ever so small. But when I put my foot on shore, I become as quiet and gentle as a lamb, unless, indeed, when I happen to be combed against the hair."

"My dear fellow," said Amherst, shaking him heartily by the hand, "nobody knows your good-nature better than I do. The kind act you have just done me, by aiding my escape from the vexation I was exposed to at home, is sufficient proof of your readiness to serve a friend."

"Don't mention it, my dear boy," cried the captain, "pray don't mention it; I would cross the Atlantic to serve the son of my old ship-mate, not to speak of the sneaking kindness I

have felt for you ever since you jumped into my arms, and kissed me, when your father insisted that you wouldn't remember old Cleaver in his tarred jacket—I mean that time when the Admiral brought you aboard of us at the Nore. Splice my mainsail! what a little urchin you were then! Why, zounds, I can hardly believe you to be the same creature! But, belay!—why do we stand jawing here? Night is about to close, and we have yet to look for some place of refreshment and repose, thof I can't say these here parts afford much prospect of our being well accommodated. I wish we had run in for one of those somewhat Christian-like towns we saw glittering along shore; for, you know, that when I am not afloat, I like to have my comfort in mine inn as well as e'er an alderman in the city.”

“ I am glad we did not,” said Amherst, “ for I am so delighted with the romantic scenery of this lovely bay, that I should have been loath to have left it unexamined. May not yonder path lead to some human habitation?—Come, let us explore it.”

“ With all my heart,” said Cleaver; “ I say,

my lads, keep watch in the boat till we return ; and, O'Gollochar, do you follow your master and me."

The footway-track Amherst had alluded to led them up a steep and very rugged ravine, the bed of which was encumbered by large fragments torn by time and weather from its rocky sides. A clear little rill, gushing from a copious spring towards its upper extremity, ran tinkling over the stony masses, and poured itself into a narrow chasm under one of the largest of them, where it was entirely lost. The fountain-head was enclosed within a circle of ancient ruined masonry, exhibiting marks of having been once polished, laid, and jointed with great nicety ; but many of the stones having been shaken from their beds, were now tufted with moss, and partially covered by the broad-leaved wild plants growing in profusion around them, and the pure water, once confined to a single jet, now rushed out through various fissures. At the distance of a yard or two above the well stood the remains of the shaft of an ancient cross, and near it on the ground lay the upper part of it, half buried by

the herbage, to which the humidity of the place gave peculiar luxuriance.

“What a lovely, wild, and interesting spot!” exclaimed Amherst.

“What a noble watering place,” cried Cleaver; “here is water enough to supply a whole navy; but what the deuce are these copper coins laid here for?”

“Judging from these fragments of a cross,” said his companion, “this must be some holy well. I have heard that such offerings are still made by the superstitious vulgar to springs once blessed by saints of former days, and ever since supposed to be peculiarly gifted, even although popery has ceased to protect them.”

Having reached the brow of the crags, a very cheerless prospect presented itself to their eyes. The downs, extending for several miles along the summit of the rocks, and rising in elevation as they retreated inland, displayed a barren surface of irregularly-blown sand heaps, covered with patches of wiry bent grass. Beyond all this a bold promontory arose to the westward, its green head exhibiting traces of ancient fortifications; and, farther still, the eye was carried

over an extensive low and sterile plain, yet more unprofitable than the ground around them. Not a house, nor even hovel, was to be descried. What appearance the country, lying beyond the ridge about a mile to the south, might wear, they had no opportunity of knowing; but, as Cleaver expressed it, what they did see looked sufficiently "glum," and damped all hopes of a snug supper. They hesitated for some time what to do. At length, as the sun had already sunk behind the huge bulk of the distant western mountains, and the sea and its coasts were beginning to melt into obscurity,—after wandering from knoll to knoll, without gaining any additional information, they finally resolved to postpone all further attempts to explore till to-morrow, and to return to spend the night on board.

As they were slowly preparing to descend into the ravine, O'Gollochar, who was immediately behind them, suddenly exclaimed, in accents of astonishment, "Sweet Vargin Mary, Master dear! what sort of a cratur is that down yonder below?"

They threw their eyes hastily in the direction

he pointed, and perceived, in the indistinctness of twilight, a little human figure, apparently a female, seated upon the shaft of the fallen cross, then about fifty yards below them. The stories they had heard of the popular superstitions of Scotland instantly crossed their minds; but whatever influence these might have had upon their attendant, whose native soil is sufficiently prolific in such belief to have given him an early tincture of it, the gentlemen laughed at such weaknesses.

“Holloa you there!” shouted Cleaver, “can you guide us to any hostel, where we may be victualled and moored for the night? You shall be well paid for your pilotage.”

The creature was sitting as if occupied in raising water from the spring. It started up at the sound, stretched its tiny arms abroad, as if in alarm, and running with the rapidity of thought three times round the circle of the well, suddenly disappeared.

Amherst, roused by curiosity from the momentary surprise this singular apparition had thrown him into, rushed impetuously down the hollow to discover where it had concealed itself.

He carefully examined every nook—he looked into every crevice where a human being might have been secreted, all the way from the spring down to the very bottom of the ravine, where it opened upon the strand, but he could not perceive the least vestige of the object of his search. Surprised and disappointed, he stood for some minutes wrapt in silent astonishment, until he was joined by Cleaver, whose obesity of person, ill calculated for such rapid movements, had permitted him to follow but slowly.

“Why, Amherst, my boy,” cried the captain, puffing and blowing as he spoke, “why, Amherst, you must surely have the legs of a goat, or a roebuck, to enable you to bound over slippery stones and rugged rocks in this sort of way. I, for my part, who did not run quite so fast, shook my carcass to pieces, and had two or three times nearly broken my legs in my attempt to overtake you. But who the devil was that person we saw?”

“The devil, indeed!” cried O’Gollochar, with a face as pale as death.

“Strange!” said Amherst, after recovering

himself, "very strange indeed! where can she have hid herself?"

"She certainly did not pass out this way," said Cleaver; "for before I started to follow you in this same break-neck, mad-cap chace, I kept my eye so fixed upon the bottom of the ravine here, that I must have seen a rat or a weasel, if it had escaped in this direction."

"She could not have scaled these walls of rock," said Amherst.

"Not unless she can walk like a fly with her head down," replied Cleaver.

"By the hill of Howth, she's a fairy or a witch," cried O'Gollochar; "I'll take my oath, I saw her vanish in a flash of fire."

"Nay, Cornelius," said his master, "your eyes have added to the mysterious circumstances of this extraordinary personage, who is certainly mysterious enough in herself, without any such flaming addition. But if we may judge of her by the seat she had chosen, she could not very well be a slave of the Devil, whose servants are supposed to flee at the very sign of the cross."

"Och, don't talk about that ould jontleman, dear master," cried O'Gollochar, crossing himself

in good earnest ; “ sure it was my crossing myself afore, when I first seen the cratur, that got us rid of her so aisily ; and now, if I might make so bould, I would advise you and the captain to get all three of us on board again, as fast as our trotters can carry us, for fear she might maybe come back again.”

After puzzling themselves with unavailing conjectures, the gentlemen returned slowly to their boat. On questioning the sailors left in charge of it, who had observed nothing, they were satisfied of the impossibility of the figure having escaped along the beach from the bottom of the ravine, the boat having been moored opposite to the very entrance of it. Their curiosity was sufficiently awakened, and they would have willingly renewed their search, but it was now so dark, that even the adjacent precipices began to be invisible, and all attempts to unravel the mystery were vain.

They were about to get into the boat, when their eyes were attracted by the sudden twinkle of a light on the shore, as if in the bend of the bay, about five or six hundred yards off. At first it seemed to glimmer like a candle or *torre,*

appearing and disappearing alternately. But suddenly it flamed up with a broad blaze to a great height, illuminating the ample mouth of a large cavern in the cliff, and throwing a red glare on its interior, whilst all around was rendered doubly obscure by its very splendour. The gleam shot across the water, and the tide, as it broke gently on the shore, flashed and sparkled under the influence of its reflection. Several figures were seen, like black shadows, occasionally crossing the light, and apparently employed in feeding the fire. A fervid imagination might have fancied them the dæmons who guard the damned spirits flitting across the threshold of the infernal regions.

“ Yonder at least are some human beings,” said Amherst ; “ let us approach, and learn from them whether there is any house in the vicinity. I confess I have no fancy to be rocked for another night by the waves, if I can possibly procure a bed for love or money on *terra firma*.”

“ Why, Master Amherst,” said Cleaver, “ I fear you are still a land-lubber for all I have done to tar you. So you ha’n’t got your sea legs yet, man ? If you had been as long tossed

upon brine as me, you would think less of its agitation. But to tell you the truth, the fresh smell of land has given me my landsman's appetite for something cooked under a roof, and I should have no objections at this moment to exchange our cold meat basket for a hot beefsteak, or pork sausage, or grilled fowl, or something else warm and savoury. Besides, I own I feel curious to know what those same cocks yonder are about. They look by that light as black as negers, and remind me of the cannibals in Robin Crusoe, dancing round the fire that roasted their prisoners. But come, let's go and have a nearer peep at them."

The two gentlemen now proceeded along the beach in the direction of the fire, followed by O'Gollochar, who, though far from being proof against fear when any thing wearing the semblance of the supernatural came across him, was a perfect lion when he knew that he had to deal with mere men. Before they had proceeded many steps, the bending of the shore, and the occasional projections of the cliffs, excluded the view of the fire for some time, until the shifting of the intervening objects again per-

mitted them to see the mouth of the cavern. They then perceived that the figures had disappeared, and that the blaze had fallen considerably lower, rising only by fits as portions of the inflamed mass, falling in from time to time towards the centre, roused its dormant energy. As they advanced, the huge vault rose before them from the smooth pebbly shore, at the distance of a few feet from the water's edge, in all the magnificence of Nature's own architecture.

The fire, composed of large pieces of broken drift wood, now burned with a subdued, but glowing glare. A heap of dry furze, lying in a corner, showed to what it had owed its former short-lived splendour. The natural walls of red sandstone were rendered still redder by the light that faded away as it rose upwards, and lost itself amidst the clouds of smoke, rolling along under the dome of the roof towards the open air. The spacious cavern, extending about forty or fifty yards inwards, appeared to be of irregular shape, and terminated in a solid face of rock, where the gleam discovered some fallen masses of stone, of many tons in weight, heaped

up one above the other, nearly to the roof. The floor was composed of a natural Mosaic of beautiful sea-polished pebbles, laid, by some high spring tide of former days, in a firm dry sand of a dazzling whiteness. There was not a vestige of that loathsome humidity and dankness, so generally disfiguring natural chambers of this description. All was dry as the artificial habitation of civilized man, save where a fountain, as pure as rock crystal, poured from an aperture at the further extremity, and after falling several feet with lulling music into a smooth oval basin it had worn for itself in the stone, ran with a rapid current that freshened the air of the place, in a channel of its own formation, towards the mouth of the cave and the sea. This fairy fountain, sparkling with the rays of light, gave to the whole the air of enchantment.

The enthusiastic Amherst was in raptures. "How romantic!" he exclaimed to his companion; "let us dispatch O'Gollochar to the boat for our provision basket, and let us eat our evening meal, and spend the night in this wonderful cavern. Those oblong blocks lying along

the wall of that inner recess, branching off to the right, will serve us for tables, seats, and beds, where we may sleep wrapped up in our cloaks, more comfortably than if we were on down. My heart bounds with delight at the wildness of the scene, and the novelty of our situation."

"Have a care, my young Don Quixote," replied Cleaver; "such adventures as these are more likely to end in bloody noses than in beef-steaks. By the bye, talking of beef-steaks, I wish we had some nice juicy rumps to dress on that same fire, for now that the smoke begins to dissipate, it is in such right good case for cooking 'em, that one cannot look at it without thinking of a gridiron. But who knows whether we may not have a visit from the cocks who made this fire, and who knows what sort of gentry they may turn out to be?"

"Oh! they are fishermen doubtless," said Amherst.

"I would not have you be too sure of that," said Cleaver; "but be they who they may, I am not the man to baulk you of your frolic, and as we have your fowling-piece there, and good

trusty cutlasses—weapons, which I do the more esteem, as they more rarely miss fire than your pop-guns—we may bid defiance to an enemy.”

O’Gollochar was accordingly forthwith dispatched for the cold provisions, with orders to the boat’s crew to return on board for the night.

On his return, the contents of the basket were spread on one of the stone-tables, and Amherst soon finished a hasty supper upon a cold sirloin of beef, washing it down with a glass or two of wine. Cleaver’s appetite was not so easily satisfied. He eat, and cut, and came again, ever and anon surveying the fire, and grumbling in unavailing regret, that it should be suffered to burn in smokeless glow, and that its beautiful cherry-red should be expended, without his having a beef-steak to dress upon it.

“ If I had only had even a frying-pan, and an onion, and a little butter, what a glorious hash I might have made ! But,” added he, with a sigh, as he put his last morsel, a thin slice coiled upon the fork, into his mouth, “ there is no help for it, we must e’en go to roost as we are.”

They accordingly now retired into the inner-

most part of the recess, forming a sort of dark chamber to the right, about a third of the way from the entrance of the grand cavern, where each occupying one of the stone-blocks, which, from their shape and position, seemed to have been placed there by human hands, they wrapped themselves up in the ample folds of their cloaks, and consigned themselves to repose. O'Gollochar, after satisfying the cravings of hunger with the fragments of the feast, disposed of himself on the ground near his master.