

CHAPTER XIII.

While 'mid the pines that clothe yon rugged steep,
 Where browze secure the stag and timorous roe,
 Which nearly circling, round thy margin sweep,
 And tint with darkest green the lake below,
 Or, 'midst these birches light, I wander slow,
 Where droop their branches on thy crystal clear.

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 Yon island castle, that in ruin hoar
 Frowns on the forest, thro' whose ruined glade
 Winds yonder secret pathway, which, of yore,
 Marauding clans with frequent booty made;
 These tow'ring rocks, that cast terrific shade,
 To me no images of danger show.

Bard of Braeriach.

In shipping such as this, the Irish Kerne,
 And untaught Indian, on the stream did glide,
 Ere sharp-keel'd boats to stem the flood did learn,
 Or fin-like oars did spread from either side.

DRYDEN.

WHEN the hour fixed for his departure arrived, Amherst privately examined both his own and his servant's arms, and saw that his pistols were in proper order, and double charged. A

small basket of provisions was made up for him by Mrs Macgillivray; and the horses being brought to the door, he bid his host and hostess a farewell suitable to such an absence as they anticipated. Criminal as he believed, nay, knew Lochandhu to be, he could not help feeling a certain degree of kindness towards him, since the Highland laird's conduct in regard to him, had been uniformly that of a warm-hearted and hospitable gentleman. That Lochandhu should have retained so strong a recollection of the obligation he owed his father, the Admiral, was at least a proof that there were some fine threads in his strangely-woven and desperate character. Above all, his steady and uniform resistance of the attempts of his natural brother against him, excited certain warm sensations he could not subdue; and as he parted from him, he pressed his hand with a cordiality for which he afterwards almost blamed himself.

He rode off; and having soon forded the river, he travelled leisurely along its southern banks, by a route now well enough known to him. He then entered among the vast pine-forests, through a wild pass running between one of those beautiful green-topped isolated hills we formerly noticed,

and the lower elevations of the great mountain group.

Every step he advanced developed scenes such as Salvator might have copied, and which would have bid defiance to his wildest fit of imagination to have improved. Rocks reared themselves up amidst the gloomy features of the fir-forest, in every possible form savage nature could present. Nor were the softer beauties wanting; for the oak, and the birch, and the luxuriant under-wood of gigantic juniper, and the large detached fragments of moss-covered stones lying scattered about, and the profusion of wild plants gracefully disposed around them, and the lovely knolls under which the track wound, imparted a thousand indescribable charms, to that which might have perhaps been of too sombre a character without them.

Immediately beyond the pass, the sun glittered on the surface of Loch an Eilan, seen through the huge upright stems of the fir trees, rising with a branchless bulk of timber, that might have supplied many a goodly mast and yard, and supporting the lofty, dense, and deep green canopy overhead. To the right of this lay a lonely lake, of about a mile and a half in circumference, every-

where surrounded by the endless forest of pine, rising tree above tree, on the sides of those lesser eminences forming its more immediate boundary, and covering them entirely, except only where the precipitous nature of the rocks bade defiance to their vegetation in certain spots, and there, breaking forth with their naked, grey, torrent-worn fronts, from amidst the wood, they gave an interesting variety to the scene. Behind these were hills of greater height, rising tier above tier, and the whole was closed in by the steep sides of those mountains, in the bosom of which this liquid mirror was enframed. From their immense magnitude and abrupt ascent, the whole visible sky appeared at first sight to be confined within a space of not much more than half a mile wide, where

——— “ The champion head
Of a steep wilderness, whose hairy sides
With thicket overgrown, grotesque and wild,
Access denied, and overhead upgrew
Insuperable height of loftiest shade
Of pine and fir.
A sylvan scene, and as the ranks ascend
Shade above shade, a woody theatre
Of stateliest view.”

But the delicate and softening mists of even-

ing, hanging between the various heights, relieved them from each other, and assisted in filling the mind with the magnitude and intricacy of the circumjacent solitude, and a knowledge of their real extent was gathered from observing that the giants of the forest were diminished to the eye by perspective, in proportion as they appeared climbing the different distances. Even upon the shaggy sides of the mountains, the pines were seen running up in long and scattered detachments, as if determined to take possession by assault, even of those bare summits towering far over every thing below, and which were still clad in the sober brown of their heathy covering. The skimming form of the eagle, seen dark amid the pure ether, and his shrill shriek, prolonged among the hollows of the mountains, were the only indications of animal life, except the light splash, and widening circle, now and then produced on the surface of the lake by the sportive trouts. These too were the only interruptions to the glassy stillness of the water, that reflected all above it, and even doubled the fair cup of the water-lily resting upon its bosom.

A few low hillocks, thinly covered with wide growing trees, divided this upper lake from that

below it, to which the mysterious dwarf had referred in her conversation with Amherst. Leaving the path that led between them, he turned off abruptly to the left towards the southern shore of Loch an Eilan.

This lake was considerably larger than the other, possessing, from similarity of situation, the same savage grandeur on its southern side, whilst its northern shores displayed a contrast of the most perfect beauty and softness. This arose from the lovely green-topped hill called the Ord Bain, the sides of which were chiefly covered with woods of oak and birch. Its projecting rocks also, being of limestone, presented masses of less rugged outline; and its slopes, where occasionally seen, exhibited a verdant turf running down in some places to the very water's edge.

Opposite to a smooth open lawny spot of this description, and but a short way from the shore, there was an island, described by tradition as being entirely artificial; and perhaps the circumstance of piles appearing among the stones, when the waters of the lake were reduced by extraordinary droughts in summer, afforded some reasonable grounds for such an idea.

The island, whether artificial or natural, was

so small, as to be entirely occupied with the shattered walls of an ancient fortalice, once a stronghold of the powerful family of the Cumins.

Such was the scene in which Amherst had now arrived. O'Gollochar was much surprised to see his master break off from the track, and dive abruptly into the shades of the Ord Bain. He followed him, however, without any remark. Having gained the thickest part of the woods upon its side, the young Englishman halted and dismounted, and bid his servant tie the horses to a tree.

Amherst then told the faithful fellow the true state of affairs, avoiding what might implicate Lochandhu, but saying enough of Alexander Macgillivray and his associates, to convince O'Gollochar of their villany, and to explain their plots against his life, and his present manœuvre to counteract them. He told him of the signal service rendered him by the Carline, as well as of the warning she had given him; and finally, he made him aware of the time and place of their proposed meeting.

O'Gollochar listened with perfect astonishment, and with occasional exclamations of horror, to his master's narrative. So carefully had every sus-

picious circumstance been concealed from him, that he had not had the slightest notion of the villanous treachery by which they had been so long surrounded at Lochandhu. What most of all surprised him was, that the Dwarfie Carline had proved so friendly. But notwithstanding all that Amherst had told him in her favour, O'Gollochar quaked at the very thought of the expected meeting. After making him examine their pistols—

“Cornelius,” said he, “I know you to be a brave fellow, when all ideas of witches, fairies, devils, and ghosts, are banished from your mind. I beg, therefore, you will summon up your courage and your wits, for, from the caution the Carline gave me that we should both come well armed, I expect we shall have something more substantial to deal with to-night than spirits or ærial beings. But soft!—was not that something like the tramp of horses, as if issuing from the pass?—Let us climb this huge fir, that looks like the last remaining denizen of former forests, to discover whether the sound we hear proceeds from Macgillivray and the gang of robbers, and if it does so, we may judge then, with some degree

of certainty, whether or not they have really gone upon the fool's errand I intended to send them."

From the lofty and umbrageous top of this immense pine, they perceived the party of villains sweeping round the other side of the lake, at one moment hid by the trees, and by the intervening hillocks and bushes, and at another, seen marching in single file among the tall leafless stems of the firs. One or two were on foot;—but the greater number were mounted on ponies, and Alexander Macgillivray and the miller rode at their head. The night was now falling fast, and their figures were soon lost amid the gloom and intricacy of the forest.

Anherst came down from the tree highly satisfied with the success of his stratagem. He made O'Gollochar untie the horses, and lead them through the wood to a more open spot, where, though equally concealed, they could pick up a little grass. This being immediately above the place of meeting, and at no great distance from it, he had it in his power, by moving forward a few steps, to command a full view of the Fairy's Oak, an immense tree, growing singly from the smooth turf of a green point, directly opposite to the islet

occupied by the castle. There he determined to remain quiet until the appointed hour.

The night was cloudy, but the moon having risen, gave a steady though chastened light, sufficient, however, to enable the eye to distinguish any object that might show itself upon the short sward of the level ground below, dedicated, by popular superstition, to the tiny green-coated race of elves, who were supposed "to daunce the maze" round the great oak. The surface of the water between the islet and the land was visible, and the dark form of the ruined castle was distinctly seen rising from it.

It was not long after Amherst had taken up this new position, that stepping from under the trees to reconnoitre, he observed a light thrown upon one of the further walls of the castle, as if from a torch or lamp, carried by some person concealed by the buildings nearest to him. Having understood that it was a ruin, and uninhabited, he was a good deal astonished with this circumstance. The light however was transient. It seemed either to have been suddenly extinguished, or moved into a situation where it was hid ;

and though he went frequently out to look for its return, he never saw it again.

After making frequent trips of observation from the shade, he at last called to O'Gollochar to come and look out. The Irishman did so, and much to the wonder of both, they beheld a small figure, sitting erect as it were, upon the water, and gliding with a slow steady motion towards the castle, as if from a part of the shore a little beyond the point immediately below them.

Amherst heard O'Gollochar's teeth chatter in his head as he stood beside him, and began to chide him for so soon giving way to his fears, at the same time earnestly reminding him of his promises.

“Faith, then, master,” said the attached Irishman, “though I don't much like the looks of yon cratur sailing on the top of the water, for all the world like a salmon, I'll stand by your honour any way, now that I'm fairly in for it, though it should be against the divil himself—Och, I beg his pardon!—but be it against whom it may, by Saint Patrick, who I wish to be about us, may I never see old Ireland again, and more nor that, may I never see Mamsel Spindle any more, whose prayers,

I hope, I have at this moment, if I don't follow your honour till I drop."

"That's bravely spoken," said Amherst to him, very much amused to hear how naturally, like an ancient knight, he had recommended himself to his patron saint and his mistress in the same breath; "that's well said, Cornelius—let me see you act up to this manly resolution, and depend upon it, you will have no arms but those of flesh to contend with."

"Flesh or fish," said Cornelius, with a determined voice, "I'm ready for whatever may come!"

By this time, the object upon the lake had moved under the deep shadow thrown on the water by the broad mass of wall, and was entirely lost. Amherst and his man however kept their eyes stedfastly fixed upon the place where it had disappeared; and, after a little time, they again perceived it gliding from the obscurity under the walls, and making as it were towards that part of the shore where the Fairy Oak spread its wide arms abroad.—Amherst had now no doubt that the figure was that of the Carline. Renewing his caution to O'Gollochar, he desired him to follow,

and hastened to descend the slope towards the tree, beneath the shade of which they awaited her landing. As she drew near to the point of the shore, he perceived, and made O'Gollochar too observe, that although there was something very ingenious, there was nothing supernatural in her mode of navigating the lake; for she sat lightly balanced on a broad thin plank, quite unequal to support the weight of any larger body, but easily bearing her small frame, which was adroitly poised on it, and oared without noise, by means of two thin pieces of lathwood.

Her frail bark had no sooner touched the shore, than she leaped to the bank, and tripped with inconceivable rapidity into the shadow formed by the great oak.

“ You are here,” she said, in a low tone of voice. “ 'Tis well!—are your arms in order, and your horses at hand?”

“ They are,” replied Amherst.

“ Then hasten to them,” said she, “ and, with this plaid folded, and stuffed with the softest and driest moss you can gather from the stones, quickly form a pillion, and fasten it securely behind your saddle;—I will be here again by the time

you have done it." And, saying so, she darted off to the water's edge.

Amherst and his servant lost no time in obeying her orders. O'Gollochar was actively useful, for his fears were now considerably moderated, by observing that this supposed witch at least worked by human means ;—his wits, therefore, began to be perfectly available.