

CHAPTER V.

THE RIVER DIVIE, WITH ITS TRIBUTARY THE DORBACK, TO DUNPHAIL.

ACCORDING to the arrangement proposed in the Preliminary Chapter, I now proceed to describe the ravages of the River Divie, which falls into the Findhorn, immediately below the house of Relugas. It has its origin in the hills, dividing the district of Braemoray from that of Strathspey, and is formed from the combination of a number of small streams. Its scenery, for a stretch of 6 or 7 miles from the spot where it leaps into its glen in a wild waterfall, to its junction with the Findhorn, is exquisitely beautiful. The estate of Dunphail, belonging to Mr. Cumming Bruce, stretches nearly to its upper extremity 5 or 6 miles above the fall; and he has, or, I should rather say, he had, a range of small farms all along its course, the haugh lands of which were entirely swept away by the flood. Immediately above the point where the Dorback falls in, the Divie carried away a beautiful bridge of one arch, which had been there for the better part of a century. The flood broke quite over the parapets, yet still the arch stood, till about a quarter of an-hour afterwards, when some very large trees came down with the stream, stuck within it for a time, and, the pressure accumulating above, it was carried off *en masse*, and actually hurried for some distance down the river, before it went to pieces and sank.* (Plate XIII.)

The Dorback comes from the wild lake of Lochindorbe, remarkable for the extensive ruins of its insulated castle, of sufficient importance, in the fourteenth century, to draw

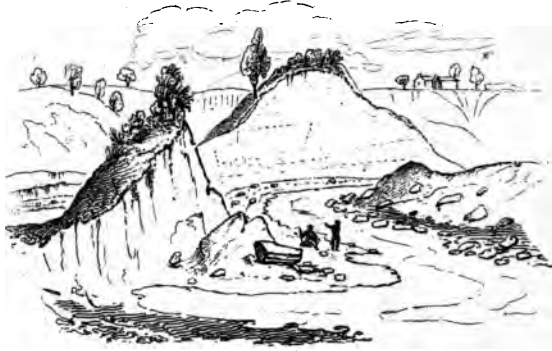
* This extraordinary fact was established by the evidence of an eye-witness, whose testimony is unquestionable; nor was this a solitary instance of so wonderful a proof of the power of the flood.

Edward III. out of his way, in order to raise the siege of it, as already noticed. The Dorback has a number of tributary burns. One of these comes out of a small lake, in which there is a floating island of some 10 or 15 yards square, that shifts its position from one side to the other, according as the winds may blow, and yet is sufficiently tenacious to support the weight of one or two people. This branch destroyed a bridge on the Grantown road, and another burn tore down the smaller bridge of Dava, swept away the garden of the inn, and the whole crop and soil of the farm attached to it.

Lord Moray's estate of Braemoray has had the whole of its low land utterly annihilated by the Dorback, and the green slopes of the hills have been converted into naked precipices. The farm of Kerrow alone lost about 30 acres, together with a recently erected meal-mill, not a vestige of which was left. The adjacent farm, occupied by Francis Gibb, lost 15 acres. Gibb, observing that the flood was making rapid encroachments on a hill, on the brow of which he had some bee-hives, determined to attempt removing them. He had succeeded in taking them all away but one, the removal of which was rendered extremely hazardous, from its proximity to the brink of the falling precipice. He approached it with much caution, and with a light step. His weight was too much for the crumbling ground. It cracked for several yards behind him. But he had already seized on the bee-hive, and with one vigorous spring he cleared the opening chasm with it; and, ere he turned to look, the whole mass was quenching its smoking fragments in the flood far below. An old woman's house, standing on the side of this hill, at a considerable distance from the river, was left by its operations on the verge of a frightful precipice. The farm of Tomdow lost 10 acres. The tenants, on this upland property, had lately begun to exhibit great industry and enterprize in cleaving and liming their land. Their crops promised amply to reward their labour, when, in this one night, all their golden hopes perished. I cannot estimate their damage, but that of their landlord amounts to £1800.

The damage done on Mr. Cumming Bruce's part of the Dorback is of the same character and comparative extent. At the Ess, or Waterfall of the Dorback, where the river runs through a ravine of 30 feet wide, the flood was 30 feet high. The inundation above this point was great, in consequence of the stoppage, and dreadful ruin was produced when it came to run off. But the operations of the river lower down demand longer detail.

Immediately opposite to a place which has the whimsical



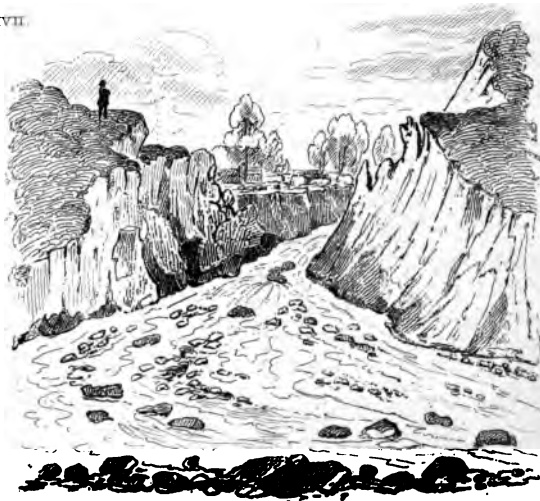
appellation of *The Stinking Stripes*, probably from some chalybeate spring in the vicinity, and in front of a handsome newly erected cottage, there is an isthmus, against the neck of which, composed of a clayey gravel, the river ran headlong for time immemorial, until it reduced it to about a dozen yards in thickness. Coming from the south, the stream, after impinging on this neck, started eastwards at a right angle, swept round a conical shaped hill (Plates XIV. and XV.), of about 70 feet high, and returned to the north side, after a circuitous course of 730 yards. The level of the stream, on the south side of the neck of the peninsula, was about 22 feet above that of the stream on the north side; and the bank between rose only about 6 feet higher than the upper stream. I have, therefore, watched this part of the Dorback with much interest for some years, in the hope of seeing it burst directly through the neck, leave its circuitous channel high and dry, and so illustrate many geological facts existing in this and other districts. The floods of August did much towards effecting this. That of the 3d, having breached completely over the narrow neck, notwithstanding its great expansion over the haugh above, and, having established a fall into the stream below, it began so to cut backwards, that, if the flood had continued many hours longer, the change would have been certainly wrought on that occasion. But, what was much to be regretted, it cut away above a third of the conical hill, the interesting memorial of one of our traditional stories. I shall give this tale as I had it from Mr. Cumming Bruce.

The last wolves existing in this district had their den in a deep sandy ravine, under the Knock of Braemoray, near the source of the Burn of Newton. Two brothers, residing at the little place of Falkirk, boldly undertook to watch the old ones out, and to kill their young; and, as every one had suffered more or less from their depredations, the excitement to learn the result of so perilous an enterprize was universal. Having seen the parent animals quit their den in search of prey, the one brother stationed himself as a sentinel to give the alarm in case the wolves should return, whilst the other threw off his plaid, and, armed with his dirk alone, crawled in to dispatch the cubs. He had not been long in the den, when the wolves were seen by the watchman hastening back to the ravine. A sudden panic seized the wretched man, and he fled, without giving the promised warning, and never stopped till he had crossed the Divie, two miles off. There, conscience stricken for his cowardice, he wounded himself in various places with his dirk, and, on reaching Falkirk, he told the people, who eagerly

collected to hear the result of the adventure, that the wolves had surprised them in the den, that his brother was killed, and that he had miraculously escaped, wounded as he was. A shout of vengeance rent the air, and each man, catching up whatever weapon he could lay hands on, the whole gathering set out, determined, at all hazards, to recover the mutilated remains of their lost friend.

But what was their astonishment, when, on reaching the Hill of Bogney, they beheld the mangled and bloody form of him they supposed dead, dragging itself towards them. For a moment they were awed by a superstitious fear, but they soon learned the history of his escape. He had found little difficulty in killing the cubs, and he was in the act of making his way out, when the mouth of the hole was darkened, and the she-wolf was upon him. With one lucky thrust of his dirk he dispatched her at once, but his contest with her grim companion was long and severe, and although he fought in that narrow place, and from behind the body of the brute he had killed, he was nearly torn to pieces before he succeeded in depriving his ferocious enemy of life. The indignation of the people against the dastard brother, on thus beholding his falsehood and cowardice made manifest, knew no bounds. They dragged him before the laird, who, on hearing the case, adjudged him to be forthwith hanged on the summit of the conical hill—a sentence that was immediately put in execution. The hill is called Thomas Rhymer's Hill, but for what reason I could never make out.

Anxious to save this interesting memorial, and also to divert the stream from cutting the banks, where the new cottage stands, Mr. Cumming Bruce came to the resolution of assisting the operations of nature, by opening a passage for the river through the neck of the peninsula. Accordingly, on the 2d November, six men went to work, at eight o'clock in the morning, and by two o'clock in the afternoon they had effected a cut ten yards long, three and-a-half feet wide, from six to eight feet deep, and with a fall of about four feet from one end to the other. The river was of its average size at the time, and a dam of a foot thick, and just of sufficient height to retain the water, was left, like the last pin that supports a vessel about to be launched. A little after four o'clock, our party reached the spot. The order was given. A man sprang into the trench, and, with one blow of a pick-axe, the frail barrier yielded to the pressure above, burst at once, and the exulting river would have swept the man before it, had he not escaped with wonderful agility down the trench, with the water at his heels. Nothing could be more interesting or striking than this event, where the



effect of a single blow was, in one moment, to produce so great a change in nature's works—a change which, though wrought by a single hand, was in itself, and in its consequences, so vast and so uncontrollable, that, if thousands of men had been on the spot, they could not have turned that river back again. On swept its devouring column, with the low hissing sound of a serpent, but with the force and swiftness of the eagle sweeping to its prey. To resist shouting was impossible. We joined in one hearty hurrah! (Plate XVI.) And, when our voices sank, we heard the deadened roar of the river, as it poured over the clayey bank, in a fall of fifteen feet, carrying everything before it, and damming back its own astonished waters, which it met and caught, after the long circuit round the Rhymer's Hill, filling them with the liquid yellow mud, into which it was almost entirely converted, by the havoc it was committing in its descent. Huge stones were continually rolling down, and some that we pushed in from the side disappeared along the cut with a rapidity which no eye could follow. It was really strange to see the water that came round the Rhymer's Hill gradually ebbing away as the new cut enlarged, until, in half an hour, it was nowhere ankle deep, except in a few pools, whither the startled trouts were struggling to save themselves. The banks of the cut, being undermined, rapidly gave way, falling in large masses at a time; so that, when we left the spot, as it grew dark, not quite an hour from the time it was opened, it had already produced an amazing change in its appearance. By eleven o'clock, the bottom of the cut was reduced to an inclined plane, and, next morning, about fifteen or sixteen hours after the opening was made, it was converted into a wide and complete river course; and, when I saw it at four o'clock in the afternoon, exactly twenty-four hours after the water was let through, it had worked its way back (Plate XVII.), quite up and across the old course, to the depth of eight feet below the level of its old, and now dry channel. Early on the morning of the 3d of November, the Findhorn, below Forres, was polluted by the quantity of puddle brought down by the Dorback, and it continued in that state for many days. For some time after the evacuation of the old bed, a powerful and very disagreeable odour, like that of an animal oil, was sensibly experienced by every one. There was no mud, the bottom being pure gravel and sand. Could this odour have proceeded from the spawn of fish?

The facts attendant on this very interesting operation are very valuable, as illustrative of the force and action of water, when confined to a channel too narrow for its quantity, and

thrown over an unnatural height, as explanatory of many appearances of old river courses, which those unaccustomed to the attentive consideration of such things hesitate to believe ever were so; and they are highly useful, as affording practical information how to deal artificially with a river.*

In tracing the Dorback downwards, we are immediately arrested by a powerful proof of the effects of the deluge of the 3d and 4th of August. This appears in a bank, about 100 feet high, immediately to the west of the new cut, which rose, with slopes and terraces, covered with a birch and alder wood. The soil, being naturally spongy, imbibed so much rain, that it became overloaded, and a mass of about an acre in extent, with all its trees on it, gave way at once, threw itself headlong down, and bounded across the bed of the Dorback, blocking up the waters, flooded and wide as they were at the time. William Macdonald, the farmer of Easter Tillyglens, witnessed this phenomenon. He told me that it fell "wi' a sort o' a dumb sound," which, though somewhat of a contradiction in terms, will yet convey the true meaning better than any more correct expression. Astonished and confounded, Macdonald remained gazing. The bottom of the valley is here some 200 yards or more wide, and the flood nearly filled it. The stoppage was not so great, therefore, as altogether to arrest the progress of the stream. But this sudden obstacle created an accumulation of water behind it, which went on increasing for nearly an hour, till, becoming too powerful to be longer resisted, the enormous dam began to yield, and was swept off at once, and hurled onwards like a floating island. But this was not all; for while Macdonald was standing, lost in wonderment, to behold his farm thus sailing off to the ocean by acres at a time, better than half-an-acre more of it rent itself away from its native hill, and descended at once, with a whole grove of trees on it, to the river, where it rested most accurately on its natural base. The flood immediately assailed this, and carried off the greater part of it piece-meal. Part of it yet remains, however, with the trees growing on it, in the upright position, after having travelled through a horizontal distance of 60 or 70 yards, with a perpendicular descent of not less than 60 feet. (Plate XVIII.)

The meal-mill and carding-mill of Dunphail were recently erected on the right bank of the Dorback, immediately above

* The Dorback has now (30th February, 1830), worked its new channel to the depth of 20 feet below the level of the old bed. It has also excavated it backwards, above 200 yards, and 50 yards forwards, in all 250 yards; and is still producing changes by every rise of the river.

a point where the glen narrows before joining the wider valley of the Divie, and within a few yards of the sloping, green, and birch-tufted bank on the eastern side; while the river, bending over quite to the western side of the glen, from a point some hundred yards above, seemed to leave them altogether beyond its reach. It is now about a year and a half since I visited these premises to inspect the machinery of the carding-mill, constructed by the ingenuity and enterprise of a most unexceptionable and meritorious young man, William Sutherland, the miller; and, on my report, a handsome premium was awarded him from the Board of Trustees for the encouragement of Scottish manufactures. I have seldom spent an hour with greater pleasure than I did that day in the contemplation of the ingenious, clean, and thriving establishment of this industrious lad. My next visit was to find it utterly ruined by the flood, and to learn the sad circumstances of its demolition.

It was in the afternoon of Monday the 3d that the Dorback began to send so much flood-water down the mill-run as to occasion a stream to flow between the dwelling-house and the partially wooded bank in front of it. This soon became so deep and strong, that, before the miller could get out his pony and his five cows, it was impossible to ford it; and the whole family, consisting of the miller, a boy—his brother, the assistant-miller, a lad, and a servant girl, were thus surrounded by the flood. The partial subsidence noticed everywhere else, took place here in the middle of the night, and the flood fell so considerably that the prisoners might have got out, but conceiving that all danger was over, they neglected to avail themselves of this opportunity. But, as they were engaged in religious worship, down came the river suddenly again upon them, re-established, with greater strength and depth than ever, the stream in front, that cut off their communication with the bank, and very soon afterwards it rose on the house, and poured into it both by the door and windows. "I ran," said the miller, "to the bed where my little brother lay, and snatching him up, I carried him out to the meal-mill, the floor of which was elevated and dry, and I kindled a fire on the bricks to keep him and the lass warm. By this time the cattle were up to their bellies in water in the byre, and I ran to throw straw bundles under them and the pigs, to raise them, to prevent their being drowned. I had hardly returned to the house, when the south gable, which had the current beating against it, fell inwards on the other room, and I was instantly obliged to knock out that window in the north gable, to let the water escape, otherwise we must have perished where we were. About five o'clock, I observed my neighbours,

John Grant and his wife, standing on the bank in front. The distance between us was not thirty yards, yet I could not make them hear for the fearsome roar of the water, which was now quite tremendous. Large trees were constantly coming down and striking against the carding-mill. The look up the water was awful. It seemed as if a sea was coming down upon us, with terrible waves, tossing themselves into the air, much higher than the houses.* I saw Grant's wife go up the bank, and she returned some time afterwards with four men. We watched them consulting together, and our hopes rose high; but when we saw them leave the place without making any attempt to save us, we thought that all hope for us in this world was gone. Willingly would I have given all I had, or might expect to possess, to have planted but the soles of my feet, and those of my companions, on yon bit green sod then still untouched by the waters. Every moment we expected the crazed walls of the house to yield, and to bury us in their ruins, or that we and it together should be swept away. We began to prepare ourselves for the fate that seemed to await us. I thank Almighty God, that supported me in that hour of trial. I felt calm and collected, and my assistant was no less so. My little brother, too, said 'he was na feared;' but the woman and the lad were frantic, and did nothing but shriek and wring their hands.

"While we were in this situation, we suddenly saw about sixty people coming down the bank, and our hopes revived. The four men had gone to raise the country, and they now appeared with ropes. All our attention was fixed on their motions. They drove a post into the ground, and threw the end of a thick rope across to me. This we fixed to a strong beam, and jammed it within the front window, whilst they on the bank made fast the other end of it to the post. A smaller rope was thrown over. This I fastened round the boy's waist, and he was dragged through the water to the bank, supporting himself all the way on the larger rope, that was stretched between the window and the post. The lass lost her hold, and was taken out half drowned; but, thank Providence! we were all saved. By six o'clock in the evening, the water had so fallen that I made my way in to give provender to the beasts. I then found that the whole Dorback had come over from the west side of the valley, and cut a new course close at the back of the mills. All the mill-leads were cut entirely away. A deep ravine was dug

* Macdonald, the farmer of Tillyglens, tells me that the waves were so high that he could not see the mills at all from his side of the river, till he climbed the bank.



out between the houses and the bank—their foundations were undermined in that direction—the machinery destroyed—the gables next the river carried away—and all, even the very ground, so ruined, that it is quite impossible ever to have mills here again.” (Plates XIX. and XX.)

Such was the miller’s own account of his disasters. Mr. Cumming Bruce said of the ravages committed here and in other parts of the valley, that they reminded him more of the devastation that took place at Martigny in 1818, than anything else. I was there two months after that awful calamity took place. There God’s judgment came and passed away with the swiftness of the thunderbolt! There the mischief was concentrated too, and the food for destruction lay more abundantly in its way. The ruin was therefore on a greater scale, and the loss of human life most calamitous. But the ravages of the flood of the 3d and 4th certainly approached much nearer to that of Martigny than those of any former domestic disaster of the same kind.

Nothing could be more desolate than the whole scene about these mills when I looked down on them in the afternoon of the 4th, from the brow of the western bank. They were still isolated by a strong stream running between them and the eastern bank. But the mill-yard was clear of water, and whilst no human being was to be seen about the deserted premises, a litter of young pigs, having escaped from their sty, were gambolling about, glad of their liberty, and a parcel of young cockerel chickens were keenly sparring with each other, as if in derision of the surrounding ruin, provoking me to quote, in burlesque, Byron’s sublime description of the battle of Thrasimene:—

And such the storm of battle in this day,
And such the phrensy, whose convulsion blinds
To all save carnage, that, beneath the fray,
An earthquake rolled unheededly away!
None felt stern Nature rocking at his feet.

It was then I saw that the destruction of the mills had been occasioned by the small burn of Wester Tillyglens, which, coming in from the left, at about 150 yards above, threw so much gravel and stones into the river as to force it over on the mills. And if it had not been for a rock that appeared where the water struck, not even a fragment of the buildings would have been left. I have noticed that this is invariably the effect of tributary streams, however small.

The beautiful Swiss bridge, a little lower down, that gave access to the mills, was not only carried off almost whole, but

the road of approach, and an immense mass of the western hill disappeared, whilst the rocky channel was filled in one place, and new rocks were brought into view at another; so that we might now safely bid defiance to the ablest engineer to erect another, with any certainty of its remaining entire for half a-year.