

CHAPTER VII

A YOUTHFUL AUTHOR

THE Highlands of Scotland are indissolubly connected in the minds of most present-day people with visions of ruddy grouse and purple heather ; tramps over glorious stretches of moorland ; sails over mimic seas ; full, jocund country-houses (and still fuller, and more jocund bachelors' boxes) ; brimming steamboats ; competing railway porters ; every sort of convenience and luxury for those who can afford to pay, and the longest of long hotel bills for all, whether they can afford or not.

Such is, perhaps, a faithful portrait of the Scottish Highlands in August and September—their season ; and in their season only are they visited, as a rule, by the world at large.

But here and there, in the merry springtime, there is a salmon river to be fished, or a moor to be inspected, or a run for health to be made, and a northern raid becomes imperative.

Then how happy is the man who wakes up some sunny morning by the banks of Loch Awe or Loch Maree, to find the whole warm air sweet with the scent of larches from which ring the loud "Cuckoos," and to behold on every side the budding and breaking forth of beauties which are usually only seen in their maturity !

In August who reckons on the myriads of sparkling flowerets which adorn the grim old Sound of Mull in

May? Who that knocks over the lordly blackcock in September thinks of the fine young fellow strutting forth in his pride, with his following of loving spouses behind him, on a dewy April morn? Who that finds music in the "Whir-r-r" of the rising wing on a cloudless "Twelfth," calls to mind the joyous note of the parent bird, the "Cock-cock-cocking" by wayside and moorland path, when the nest was full, and the hatching in progress a few months before?

Only those few and far-between adventurous spirits who, as we have said, for purposes of their own, resisting the blandishments of pleasure, the toils of ambition, or the tether of custom, have left the madding crowd behind and soared into this aerial world of innocence and delight, can know or picture what is to be found there.

To the delicious, drowsy re-awakening of the mountain solitudes after their wintry slumbers, there are, however, a few drawbacks, for which it would be well for the uninitiated to be prepared. Let me give an instance.

My father, when seeking for a new Highland home, which he did on an average every three years, was in the habit of starting off with an agent's list in his pocket, soon after the days began to lengthen and genial weather to set in.

He drove himself in a light mail phaeton which accommodated three, and once when it fell to my lot to be one, we spent the night preceding Mayday at the little inn above the Pass of Glencoe.

The winter had been severe and prolonged; the frowning heights around were still swathed in snow, from which black and rugged peaks jutted forth at intervals, and travellers so early in the year had not been looked for in that lonely spot. When we drove up—and it had been a long drive by way of Crianlarich, Tyndrum, and the Black

Mount—a long, rough drive—and we were spent and weary, we were not welcomed in the usual hospitable fashion. Host and hostess looked blank and bewildered, and it soon appeared why. Their rooms were still shut up; the beds had not been slept in since the previous October; and there was nothing to eat—nothing at least that “gentry folk” could eat—in the house!

This was frankly owned, but still the case was desperate. Night was drawing on apace, our horse was dead tired, and there was no other human dwelling within range. We laughed aside the scared looks of our perfunctory entertainers, who did their best to recover themselves in consequence, and entered the house.

Owing to improvidence or ill-luck, no food had been tasted by any of the party since an early breakfast; wherefore it may be imagined how appetising would have been the odour of frizzling trout, or savoury ham and eggs, or, in short, almost anything that might have seemed within the range of the solitary inn.

Almost anything? Certainly anything in the shape of buffalo steak, or rhinoceros hump. We sat round the crackling fire in the little peat-reeking parlour, and cheerfully awaited our supper. Whatever it might consist of, we were, or thought we were, prepared for.

But *braxy mutton*? Has the reader ever tasted, has he ever smelt, braxy mutton? Mutton so called is the body of a sheep which has either died, or had to be killed, when suffering from a complaint which, though hard upon the sheep, is innocuous to the eater. The sheep, having reached an advanced state of *embonpoint*, surrenders to fate, and this mutton is largely consumed, and not at all objected to, by the denizens of the Scottish wilds.

But oh, that first whiff from the kitchen! That puff from the passage! Our sickened stomachs could stand no

more ; and as the horrible dish was borne in, with one accord we demanded that it should be borne out again.

We tried the eggs. Another anguish of disappointment.

Then the scones. They were damp, flabby, and tough beyond power of thought to conceive : teeth could not rend them.

Lastly, the oatcakes (bread there was none) ; and the oatcakes, hard as flint, dry, tasteless, and white as a dusty road in a March east wind, proved the only accompaniment to the hot whisky-toddy which helped us to endure starvation.

Perhaps it also saved us from rheumatic fever ; for no sooner had we taken off our upper garments in the mouldy confines of an upper chamber than a voice was at the door. "Out of bed with you, quick !—Oh, you're not in ? Well, don't get in !—What ? Oh, you *must* !—Lie down anywhere. Hoots ! you *must*. Your mother told me to keep an eye on you, and the whole place is dripping. Here—here's some more whisky ; it's all I can do for you. Nonsense ! never mind if it does " ; (the protest may be inferred), "and mind, wrap yourselves in your plaids, and lie on the floor."

He was not to be trifled with. Sadly we had to obey, but I am bound to add, soundly we slept ; and early, early we were off, fleeing the baleful spot, and devoutly trusting never to return.

But what a Mayday was that which broke as we traversed dark Glencoe, now ablaze in sunshine, with melting, shining sheets of rock reflecting every spreading ray, with the eagle circling round the topmost peak, and the roar of hidden waterfalls on every side !

What a thundering from point to point and crag to crag ! What a liberal outpouring of rejoicing birds ! What merriment among the lambkins ! "Begone, dull

care! Hence, loathed melancholy!" Away with every thought of every evil past, and every lurking fear of ills to come! That smiling scene, wet with its thousand tears, that emergence into warmth and sunlight from the dark tunnel of its wintry tomb, was one to drive from the most insensate breast every lingering regret or apprehension. Even now—now when so many years have rolled between—the whole is as fresh before the writer's eyes as though beheld but yesterday; and the beauty, the glory, the majesty of that May morning on the wild mountainsides of Glencoe remain a memory which Time has never effaced nor other scenes eclipsed.

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We were not, however, destined to pitch our tent so far north that year. After prospecting in various directions, my father decided upon Garth House, in Perthshire—a county he already knew something of, having rented Kinnaird in the earlier years of his married life, before I, his seventh child, was born. (He had also tenanted Leny, near Callander; Sonachan, on Loch Awe; and other places—of which, for the same reason, I can say nothing.)

Garth is a substantial, modern residence, which belonged at that time to Colonel Macdonald of St Martin's, a friend of my parents, who visited us there and elsewhere. It is beautifully situated on the river Lyon, and in addition to the fishing belonging to it, my father acquired that of Meggernie, fourteen miles up the glen.

To reach this we had to pass Chesthill, where dwelt two brother bachelors, and often saw them together down by the riverside.

One only, however, wielded a rod; and on this being commented upon by a stranger one day, with the inquiry, "Does not the other Mr Menzies care for fishing also?"

—my father made something of an Irish bull in reply : “ Oh, poor fellow, he can't fish ; he's blind ; he only comes down *to look on.*”

The Lyon not being so rapid a stream as the Dee, we were not cut off from communication with the opposite bank as at Blackhall, a ferry-boat plying to and fro just beneath our windows ; and we were thus enabled to climb over the heathery shoulder of Drummond Hill, and drop on to Kenmore, Lord Breadalbane's model village, at the southern end of Loch Tay, while my mother could also drive there by a very slightly longer route.

Aberfeldy was, however, our nearest “ town,” though seven miles off—and even to reach Aberfeldy from the south we had to take the road from Dunkeld, some distance. Long ago a branch line of rail has connected these two last places, but it was not even thought of when we went to Garth.

A trifling incident in connection with this sticks to my memory. The bulk of our party having been despatched from Dunkeld, the rest were awaiting a carriage which had been ordered to come round to the inn-door, when a commotion was heard below—we being in the little parlour above.

We had peered out at the sound of wheels ; and now we saw an elderly gentleman, whom the same wheels had attracted, spring up the steps and resolutely seat himself within the carriage.

The host, as well as the stable ostlers, were humbly endeavouring to expostulate ; but Sir Robert Menzies was a tough customer to deal with. He alleged that the carriage was his, had been ordered by him, and would not hear of any prior claims to it.

He had red hair and the proverbial temper that goes with it ; while my father, good-humoured and easy-going in general, was not without a dash of “ chestnut horse ” in him when roused.

He and Sir Robert had been friends in youth, had pulled as oarsmen in the same boat, when challenging other crews, as was then the fashion ; but they had drifted apart, and one was probably as disinclined as the other to meet again—under the circumstances.

Two shy, proud, angry men, neither of whom would abate an inch of his dignity—what was the unfortunate landlord to do ?

He flew between the two, upstairs and down, pleading and representing, then stood still and scratched his head.

Sir Robert sat in the carriage and called to his women-kind to get in. My father hid in the parlour and forbade his to budge.

He felt secure in having the stronger case, for though we were in the Menzies country, and it was a daring act on the part of a humble innkeeper to thwart the fiery laird who snorted at him from his vantage-ground, on the other hand, the poor wretch had a son, and that son had just entered on a lease of one of the great hotels on Loch Lomond. To flout a brother of Sir James Colquhoun might have spelt ruin to his offspring.

Rendered desperate, he approached the carriage for the last time, and whatever it was he said, it had the desired effect. The irascible baronet bounced out as he had bounced in, and disappeared, when, but not till the coast was clear, we descended, and drove off.

I may add that as Castle Menzies was within easy range of Garth, it was impossible for the inmates of both houses not to behave afterwards as neighbours, and this proper state of things was brought about somehow ; but a dead silence was always maintained as to the tussle at the inn-door !

It may have been on the above occasion, or upon another (for we had constantly to pass along the same road), that a fisherman, up to his waist in mid-stream, was pointed out

by our driver, who, probably a poacher himself, obviously appreciated the delicate precision with which the casts were thrown.

“Thon’s a penter-lad,” explained he, sitting round to see the better. “He lodges hereabouts. And when he’s no pentin’ he’s fishin’, and when he’s no fishin’ he’s pentin’.”

“He can fish,” observed my father, also eying the swirl of the line; but he did not know then, nor till long afterwards, how well it was for the world that when the “penter-lad” was “no fishin’ he was pentin’,”—for the name of the lad was John Millais.

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After our prolonged sojourn in the isolated Hebrides, it was no doubt a pleasant change to the feminine elders of the family to find themselves once more in a good country-house like Garth; though we younger ones always loved Glenforsa best, and often on a sunny morning sighed for our early ride to the post-box and the sight of wild Loch Nagaul, with its bold headlands melting away into the blue beyond.

We appreciated the garden at Garth, however—a large, rambling, delightful garden, stocked to the brim, and with a fine range of greenhouses and vineries to boot.

Gooseberries? Can anyone who is not conversant with the Scottish garden, either past or present, know what a real gooseberry is? Those we meet with in the south are not worthy of the name; no wonder they are disdained as coarse and tasteless, only fit for pies in May.

But the gooseberry that is pruned and trimmed and respectfully netted like peaches and apricots—the gooseberry that abounds beneath the shelter of the south wall (though it may be outside the wall), prolific to a degree undreamed of by the Sassenach, with Honeyglobes, Ironmongers, or, best

of all, the small round, green, hairy berry, through whose thin skin the seeds show—those are the true products of the soil, and the daintiest epicure can hardly despise them.

They are sweetest on the lowest branch. Perhaps the gardeners' cottages are near, and hens scuffle in the warm earth beneath? Never mind that. Pick and eat the dusty fellows—you will find them worth it.

Even a dog may teach you something in that respect—at least our dog Dash could. Dash was a black retriever, highly sagacious. Either he had been taught in his puppy days to eat fruit, or had found out what was what for himself—anyhow, he would lie panting among the heavy-laden gooseberry bushes on a sweltering August day, then, as the fancy took him, turn up his head, cock his eye, and snap!

He liked to snap in comfort. He never altered his position, nor did he, so far as we know, pay any heed to gooseberries except when in repose—although we often took him for a walk round to see what he would do; but it was an attested fact that, when lying down at leisure, he was sure to indulge his appetite sooner or later, and after what happened one day to one of his youthful masters, my father was sometimes nervous about Dash. Had Dash eaten a gooseberry with a wasp in it, the consequences might have been serious.

But let me narrate the accident to which I refer. It happened to a younger brother, and in an agony of pain and fright he rushed to Aiky, his quondam nurse who was now housekeeper, and mercifully in her store-room at the moment. The tongue had already begun to swell: the wasp—who could tell?—might have left its sting in it—in any case the danger of suffocation was great.

Without loss of an instant, Aiky applied carbonate of soda, and continued applying it. And we all remembered

afterwards what the remedy was, for the doctor, who was far up in the glen when summoned, and did not arrive till the peril was past, emphatically stated that the little boy's life was saved thereby, not failing, however, to add that had the sting been half an inch lower down the throat, even carbonate of soda would have availed nothing.

After that we were, of course, very timid about wasps—for a time—and even gave bees a wide berth, though a keeper, M'Craw, cultivated them and could do anything with them.

"Julius Cæsar M'Craw," my father dubbed this man. He held in whimsical derision the practice of tacking on grandiloquent Christian names to common, ugly-sounding surnames, and could not resist making these up when opportunity offered, so that we had a perfect collection of them, though I think "Julius Cæsar M'Craw" was the oddest.

"Julius Cæsar" had a very sweet tooth. He dearly liked the damaged dates and raisins with which it was his duty to provide the young pheasants, and was invariably munching when we came across him, while his pockets bulged significantly. However, as the pheasants thrived, there seemed to be enough for all.

I have said that we often crossed in the ferry-boat to the other side of the river Lyon, and climbed the purple hillside opposite. There it was that an incident—not an accident this time—befell myself. I was running, and fell over a whin-bush, when something, some awful thing, like a volcano, broke loose beneath my nose, and with a mighty rushing sound soared aloft.

The very atmosphere quivered, and the earth shook—or so it seemed. Paralysed, I lay still, while the giant capercailzie—the only one I ever saw at close quarters—vanished among the pine trees. Capercailzies were not common

even in those days ; I fancy they are almost extinct in Scotland now.

But there were red-deer in abundance on that hillside, and at a certain season of the year we were forbidden to go there. We could hear their "belling" to each other, and at nights this weird note would sometimes sound quite near, as there was a drinking-place beneath our windows, whereupon, if we were in bed, we rose and looked out. I do not, however, remember ever seeing a monarch of the glen, so probably they waited till hidden by the darkness.

Here let me record what I once did see—a sight never to be forgotten—namely, a battle-royal between two noble stags when choosing their hinds for the season.

I had wandered to a lonely part of the deer-park at Cobham Hall, Kent, and was absorbed in a book—must have been absorbed for some time—when suddenly I became conscious of a loud rattling, clattering, and scuffling close at hand. Cautiously peeping round the tree, whose giant stem hid me from their view, I found that a whole herd of fallow-deer had gathered together, and were watching with silent interest a fight between two champions. The fight lasted some minutes—not very long, I daresay ; but the antlered heads were again and again locked and loosened before one grand fellow, the larger of the two, after a final and protracted struggle, freed himself, shook his head, and slowly turned round.

He did not, however, quit the field ; *that* he left to his victorious opponent ; and a pretty sight it was to see the air with which the latter, after a moment's pause as though to make sure of his triumph, selected his fair ones by some telepathic communication known to themselves, and led them away.

In an instant another combat was begun. The vanquished stag was challenged afresh ; and so on, till every

female member of the herd was allotted her mate, when, as silently as they came, they dispersed, and the tall bracken swallowed them up.

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But if we had no encounters with deer at Garth, we had something to endure from venison. With venison we were always abundantly supplied, as, when we had no deer-forest of our own, it was sent in from Rossdhu and other places ; and why I remember it at Garth, was because we had there a cook who had her own notions on the subject. She could not and would not roast a haunch before it was thoroughly "high." Aiky reported that she could do nothing with Mrs Cook, who, having lived in that capacity in a certain ducal household, was not to be set right on such a point. "Me not know when venison is fit for the table!" Aiky reported her as saying: "*Me that have sent it up when the ladies was faintin' all round—and the duke said it was butiful!*"

In the end, however, she had to go back to her duke, or to someone else who liked "butiful" meat ; for it was the same with all game, and our less exalted palates and nostrils could not stand it.

In especial my father vowed that she fairly chased him out of his den. His den was a small, sunny nook, right over the kitchen, in which he usually spent his mornings, engaged, when not arranging his specimens, in the delicate manufacture of salmon flies.

He never threw a fly that he had not himself tied ; and it was a marvel that hands so broad and strong, so fitted to wield the rod and gun, should be able to perform as they did such miracles of intricate, finikin workmanship.

He also fished entirely with a single gut, and strengthened this by strapping it with india-rubber. Perhaps all salmon

fishers do the like, but I mention it as possibly typical of a time when methods were more primitive than now.

I wonder if any man nowadays cleans his own gun? I have seen my father in his shirt-sleeves, working like any hodman over a pail of water, and sending for pail after pail too, when the ramrods were fizzing up and down the well-worn barrels. But sport fifty years ago included other matters than the mere filling of the bag.

As for the luncheon! "Bags that go out full come back empty," cried the sportsman of the past; and though ponies went up to the moor at mid-day to bring home the morning's luck, the most they ever carried of food and drink was a packet of sandwiches and some bottles of spruce beer. The spruce beer was home-brewed, and had to be made often—we were all so fond of it; but, like the rest, it has fallen out of favour now, I fancy.

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Garth House was a memorable Highland home to me individually, because it was there that I wrote my first original work of fiction.

It has been said of me that I began to scribble in the earliest days of childhood. This is not true; I had not even the desire to do so, being far too fond of an outdoor life directly lesson-hours were over. But we had a longer summer holiday than usual at Garth, owing to a change of dynasty in the schoolroom; and perhaps that release from maps and grammars, and perhaps also a growing passion for reading, kindled a new flame.

There was a large sunny room at the far end of a passage which was rarely used, as spare rooms more conveniently situated were plentiful, and we never had many visitors at a time. My pair sister and I dried rose-leaves there, spreading them on newspapers with which we bestrewed the

floor ; and, seeking a quiet retreat for an enterprise which must be hidden from every eye, I carried thither an exercise-book and a pencil.

With these in my lap I squatted beside the rose-leaves—having first spread open a large screen in front of the door. Anyone entering—and there was always an off-chance of someone entering—would only find a little girl busy with her *pot pourri*, and would never think of looking beneath the newspaper.

At night also the book lay safe in its secret resting-place, and silent as the grave was the author about its existence. Even now I doubt if some members of my family will not be surprised to learn that a novel (save the mark !) yclept *Macgregor ; or, Our Chieftain*, came into being in the blue room at Garth, in the year 1858 ; and I am quite sure that no one ever saw it or heard of it then.

As may be guessed, it was a barefaced imitation of the author who was then my divinity—thus much I remember ; also that after a couple more exercise-books had been filled with high-flown *Scottese* of the most blatant type, “Macgregor” —a roaring, ruthless, lawless brigand of the approved order—abruptly perished, and all record of him was destroyed. I think, I hope, I recognised that there was no single merit in the audacious attempt.

Certainly it was not repeated for some years. When we went into Edinburgh, masters for various branches of knowledge, as well as for music, drawing, and other accomplishments, were now substituted for home tuition ; and, eager to learn, I obtained permission to study Latin and algebra along with my younger brothers, who had as usual a tutor from the University. The strain of all this was enough, and it was not until in a measure freed from it when nearly eighteen that I tried again my 'prentice hand at composition. Of that, more later on.