

CHAPTER VI.

LOCH ROAG.

ON LOCH ROAG—LOBSTER CREELS—OUR BOAT—GOOD OYSTERS OBTAINABLE—EXCURSIONS—THE NARROWS—A BABY WHALE—STORIES OF WHALE—FLOUNDER-FISHERS—SEA-BIRDS—BEAUTIFUL GULLS—NEIL MAC RUARI—STORY OF THE MACKENZIES—EXPOSURE OF WOMEN ON A ROCK—SEALS—WITCHES.

A GLANCE at the map will show the position of that large bay or fiord called Loch Roag, about ten miles wide from Gallon Head to Carloway Point, on the western coast of Lewis. The large island of Bernera divides it into two not very unequal halves, the southern of which especially is gemmed with a number of beautiful smaller islands and islets, from high, heather-tipped braes to mere bits of seaweed-girt rock rearing their barren heads as resting-places for seal and seagull.

Much pleasant sailing and very lovely scenery is to be had among these islands, where the winged life is abundant, and the seas in their

depths, in the outer parts at least, teem with fish. Lobster-creels are to be met with in every direction, and the red lug-sails of the smaller fishing-boats, belonging to those wild coast villages, are often to be discerned, giving a pleasant bit of colour to the mingled sea and landscape.

The narrows, which separated our land-locked fiord from the outer loch, were only negotiable, generally, at those states of the tide which admitted of our exit or entry with it in our favour, or when the tide was slack. There was no pulling against the race in the full flow or ebb. So we were obliged to select our days for excursions outside according to the tide.

At the foot of the knoll on which our lodge was built, and jutting so far into the waters of Little Loch Roag, that we could embark or land at all times, was a rough stone jetty 'the pier of the wintering bulls.' It was so named in consequence of the receipts from the grazing of several bulls having been applied to its erection by us. The grazing on the cleared part of the Scaliscro ground belonged to the tenant, and it had been customary to allow certain bulls to make it their

winter quarters. Indeed, one old fellow seemed to entertain the idea that he had a prescriptive right to take his winter feeding there, for he had been known to appear on the scene on his own invitation, did no one drive him there at such time as he deemed fit.

We kept a boat of about two or three tons moored off the pier. It belonged to John and Donald Ferguson, and was hired by us. It had four sweeps and a lug-sail, so with our strong crew we were fairly independent in respect of wind and weather. The dear old tub—endeared to us by the recollection of many pleasant trips in it—was slow, broad in the beam, and very safe; and, as we had a few planks at the stern which raised it almost to the dignity of a half-deck, it suited us fairly well, for, with the aid of a chair for the lady, the accommodation though rough was sufficient.

Very good oysters were obtainable at the head of our loch, and these we used to collect at the lowest spring tides, and transfer them to our own shore by the jetty where we could get at them at half tide or so, and were therefore readily accessible when required. Mussels and most other shell-

fish were to be had in quantities for the gathering.

A description of one or two excursions will serve to convey an impression of the scenery of this wild and beautiful inlet of the Atlantic, and of the sayings and doings connected with some of our little cruises.

One day we resolved that we would go down to the sea in our little ship with the double object of fishing for flounders, at a place about six or seven miles off, and at the same endeavour to get a sight of a small whale, which it was reported had entered the narrows, and was occasionally to be seen disporting himself in the bays just above them. It was a mere baby whale, a little innocent under a dozen feet long.

Many years before, a herd or schule of large whales had found their way into Little Loch Roag, and been driven on shore; but, as I was not there to see, I will not attempt to describe the scene as it was reported to us, but refer the reader to a similar one narrated by Mr. Hutchinson, or to one still better known, that from the master-hand of Scott in the 'Pirate.'

As there was a nice and favourable breeze, we hoisted our lug for a run down the loch, and made

good progress with the tide in our favour. The village of Einacleit on the other side, with its little tortuous strips of cultivation creeping along rocks and heathery places like so many gigantic caterpillars, was soon reached and passed. The first objects of interest on our right were some bold crags, in the crevices of which honeysuckle and other stunted plants had limited root-hold. There was often a hawk or two to be seen above them, and one day we watched with much interest a chase right across the loch of some small bird by one of these marauders. After various dodgings, and several times, as we thought, being struck, in each instance eluding its enemy, it finally to our satisfaction made good its escape among the rocks and sea-weed of the opposite shore.

Next on our right came the little twin islands of Eilean Dhu (black island) and Eilean Glass (green island), and a third called Eilean Neil, and nearly opposite the few scattered huts which were known as Ungurshadr. One of these was Kenneth's dwelling, and a wild and picturesque spot it was. Situated on a little promontory, on one side of which a burn tumbled into the loch, it overlooked the narrows, and all the wild din and turmoil of

the race of waters there, as—bubbling and seething, and rolling in miniature whirlpools, at times unsafe for small boats, the tide forced its way into the contracted gut or passage, and rushed headlong in or out, according as it was flow or ebb.

That wildly-situated cottage was well stocked with bairns. Something in the shape of laddie or lassie was always to be seen hovering about as we passed. Ah! if all the crops in the Lews turned out half as well as that, the Lews man would be well-to-do.

'It's a crap that never fails,' said an old Scotch lady in the south of Scotland to a relative of my own.

Poor Kenneth had indeed many mouths to feed, and no wonder with so much to consider, and with the somewhat mournful surroundings of his home, he was a grave and silent man.

The whale did not put in an appearance, and we were soon in the race, amidst the little bubbling and breaking waves outside the entrance to the narrows. We took down the lug, for in the narrows the wind was very uncertain, being caught and deflected from the many crags and

eminences by which it was girt. Oars were got out to steady the boat if necessary, and then we were among the little whirlpools. Round we slowly spun, as a great swelling roll of the water somewhat lifted the boat and took us into the vortex, all the time rapidly hurrying us forward. This was repeated once or twice, and then we had passed the narrowest part at the entrance, and swept along in more equable fashion. Stack Glass (the green rock), now submerged on our right, we shot past, and also another dangerous rock on the left, and gliding along the winding channel by pretty broken little crags on our right, with a sheltered bay or two, we neared Stack Alister (Alexander's rock). This was so called from the circumstance of one Alister having managed to get his boat jammed between the two points which formed the top of the rock. There he had to remain high and dry aloft till the rising tide floated him off. After that the narrows opened more, and the pace at which we had been hurried, decreased.

Many birds were about in all directions, including some specimens of the great northern diver we had left in Little Loch Roag. I hardly know why,

but their wild and somewhat mournful wail often brings to my mind a line from Lalla Rookh, 'Like some lone spirit crushed by fate.'

Hérons standing, grey and still, were always to be seen, till roused by our approach. The great black-backed gull, too, was far more plentiful than desirable, and at these we often shot, as they are vermin of the worst description. Curlews were there in plenty, but as cute and wary as they are elsewhere, and rarely allowed us within a hundred yards.

Beautiful gulls of many descriptions, sometimes sitting calmly on the top of rocks just above water-mark, shags, comorants or scarts, were all plentiful, and, as we got farther out, guillemots and terns, sea-pies, and many other species were added, and gave grace and beauty to the scene—and, above all, the Solan goose. We loved to watch him from his airy height close his wings and drop like a bolt into the sea in search of his prey. We waged no war with these. One of our passengers would have been much grieved had it been otherwise. The useless slaughter of the beautiful creatures was to her revolting, so we only occasionally tried our rifles. A scart or two we did

occasionally kill, for the men considered them as very eatable when skinned and properly prepared. John invited us to try this delicacy for our own table, assuring us that we should find them capital eating. We, however, declined. Like the American trapper, when questioned as to his gastronomical tastes: 'I kin eat biled crow, but I don't hanker arter it.' So we did not 'hanker arter' cormorant, roast or 'biled.'

The lug was re-hoisted as the narrows opened to outer Loch Roag, and we caught a glimpse through the nearer islands of the 'old hill.' This was a serrated mass of rock perhaps half-a-mile long, about the centre of Loch Roag, outside its outer margin, and about eight miles from whence we viewed it. Rising to a height, I believe, of something like two hundred and fifty feet, it is fully exposed to the utmost violence of the rude Atlantic storms, and is probably the most so of all the spots on that weather-beaten coast. Its fissured sides are inaccessible, and I think there is only one spot where a landing can be effected in calm weather. It is said that in winter this storm-lashed island presents so great an obstacle to the full force of the great Atlantic waves that,

bursting on it, they make a complete breach over it.

Inland of it, towards the outer end of Bernera, are two other islands, which, from the point of view we had, seemed incorporated with it. How different their appearance now, on this fine, early autumn day! A line of white there certainly was at their base, but above the breaking sea the crags rose steeped in a soft, mellow light, as if the finest of diaphanous yellow gauzes had been hung between us and them. History records that on one of the two islands referred to a tragic event took place.

Neil Mac Ruari, the last remaining natural son of the great Lews chief, Ruari Macleod, early in the seventeenth century had expelled a colony of Fife gentlemen, who, by purchase, had acquired from the Crown certain rights in the Lews. But in those days every man's hand seems to have been against his neighbour's, and of all connected with the Lews it might indeed with truth be said,

‘For why? Because the good old rule
Sufficeth them, the simple plan,
That they should take who have the power,
And they should keep who can.’

The power to retain conferred right.

Mackenzie of Kintail acquired such rights as the Fife colony possessed, which, added to those he professed himself to hold, he determined to enforce. He accordingly landed, with a commission of fire and sword, and soon over-ran the country, forcing Neil to retire to his stronghold of Berissy, which, with the assistance of the pirate Peter Love, he had fortified with guns. By a gross act of treachery, in which Peter's affection for Neil's niece forms a conspicuous element, Neil seized his friend Peter, his ship, and his valuables, and delivered up the former to justice, though it is not recorded that the goods followed the pirate, who, with his crew, was hung at Leith. He had expected pardon for himself and legitimate brother Tormad for the act, but it was not granted.

Notwithstanding all the efforts of the Mackenzies, Neil held out in his stronghold, apparently in allegiance to his brother Tormad, who was himself in durance vile, and whom he considered the rightful heir. The Mackenzie now resorted to a stratagem to secure the person of Neil, of which the most ferocious and bloody chief of that, or any other, age might well be proud.

They seized all the women and children belonging to Neil and his followers on the mainland, and exposed them on a rock, bare at the ebb but submerged at high tide, opposite Berissy. It was then notified to Neil, if he did not surrender, they would be left to be engulfed by the inflowing tide.

The lamentations of these poor creatures as the tide rose produced the desired effect, and, to save them, Neil and his company, ruthless though they were, delivered up their stronghold. Neil retired to Harris, but this desperate and lawless chief was eventually hung at Leith, in 1613.

I have derived these interesting details (somewhat abbreviated from the text) from Mr. Anderson Smith's excellent little work 'Lewsiana,' to which I have previously referred. Should he ever see this, I beg to tender him my thanks, and, if necessary, my apologies, for so freely adopting what adds no small interest to the islands of Loch Roag.

But to return from history to our cruise. Rounding the point, which formed the outer limit of the narrows, we passed between it and the pretty, heathery little island of Garavelein,

and then opened Loch Strome, a deep bay or indentation on the mainland. On one of the green-topped islets which stretched across a portion of its mouth was one solitary black sheep, not sent to solitary confinement for any misdemeanour, such as his colour might indicate, but because the green knoll which rose from the sea-weed could not support more than one, black or white. A little, wild Highland Lewis sheep had need to be possessed of a strong digestion; but rock and seaweed afford but poor provender even for him. Seals were often to be seen in and about Strome Bay, but they were very wary, and I think I only once got a long shot at one, when he was swimming. By the turmoil he made in the water, we thought he was hit, but we saw nothing more of the poor beast. Another point, and another deep bay—Drovenish Bay—were soon passed, and, while we were thus quietly and comfortably sailing to our destination, the talk fell on whales, and we elicited from John one or two stories respecting them, which I think are worth repeating. I give them in his own concise and racy language, as he has since sent them to me.

‘ You see, Mistress N.,’—for he addressed himself to my wife,—‘ as the story goes, a big whale came on the sand at low water on the north end of the island of Bernera, and the man that found her he commenced to cut her blubber off to get a good share before his neighbours would know of it. He commenced to cut the blubber from the back of the whale, himself being on the back of the whale at the time, and, being hot at work, never knew life in the whale till he found whale and himself afloat out of his depth, and, being not a swimmer, he fixed the cleaver in to the handle in the whale’s blubber, and held fast to the cleaver till the whale went round the island and turned to the same sand she left with the man. The whale could not go under, owing to the blubber being cut from part of her back, the reason that she could not go under water.’

On expressing some little mild astonishment at this unequalled feat of—sea-horsemanship, I was going to say, John appealed to the men.

‘ It’s truth I’m speaking, sir,’ he said. ‘ It’s weel kent here aboot. Is it no, lads?’

‘ Ou, ay!’ responded the lads. ‘ It’s true eneuch.’

We asked for more, and, after interchange of a few rapid Gaelic sentences with 'the lads,' John gave us the following :

' It was in the sound between Harris and Skye. This was not the same sort of whale as the one in Bernera. This sort had a fin on the back like the sail of a boat. The Gaelic name on this sort is "Cearban," and the man that went down with this was ever after that called "Cearban," so the name follows his generation yet. The whale, as history says, was asleep on the top of the water. The boat went close to harpoon her, and in the act of harpooning the man had not time to loose his hold, and down he went to the bottom. Next instant the whale came up with the man on the top of the harpoon, and remained motionless, till those in the boat got hold of the man, and he was saved.'

These, we all agreed, were two remarkable escapes, both firmly believed in by the men. Those that go down to the sea in ships and occupy their business in great waters see many strange things and hear of more, and no doubt many a seemingly improbable but true tale could be told by the fishermen on these wild coasts.

Looking out away through the channel between the island of Wia Vohr (it sounded like that, but there are no W.'s or V.'s in Gaelic, and I believe it is spelt Bheaudha Mohr), and the promontory of Reef, we sighted a small island which was noted as a prolific breeding-place of some of the gulls and guillemots. John described it to us, for he had recently visited it to procure some eggs for our collection.

'In May,' he said, 'the flowers were so sweet that you could feel the flavour of them half-a-mile off,' and when approached the sea-birds rose in such numbers as 'fairly took the sky from you.'

This island, 'Flodaedh,' I think, and 'Pabhay,' were great breeding-places. Geese too, of which we often saw a 'gaggle,' or flock, bred on Wia Vohr.

We were now approaching the extremity of that island, having left small islands on either hand since we cleared Drovenish Bay. Running along the shore, we passed between the knobs at its extremity and a bad rock, just awash, and, emerging into the narrow channel between it and Bernera, anchored in it just behind a low green

islet. Here we got out the hand-lines and leads, and set to work fishing on a clean sandbank, which we could see in the clear water some fathoms below our keel.

John Mackenzie acted as the lady's henchman on this occasion, and baited her hooks with that portion of the mussel used for this purpose. As a convenient receptacle, he kept a small store of them in his mouth, ready for use. Whether or no he imparted to them an attractive scent or flavour—and he was very fond of a plug of pigtail—I do not know, but the 'leddy' caught as many fish as all the rest of us put together. An excellent baitsman was John Mackenzie. He did not trouble himself to throw away the remnants of the bait left on the hook when fresh was put on, but ate them. It was 'ferry goot,' like many other things with him, especially, just now, a particular sort of sea-weed which he had found, and which he crammed into his mouth, when relieved of its duties as a receptacle for bait, by the handful. It is, I believe, the 'dulsh' of elsewhere.

A splendid lot of flounders we obtained, some running large. Occasionally we—especially the

'leddy'—had two on at a time. John Mackenzie cut a bit off the tail of each capture made by the 'leddy,' so that no mistake should be made. A small cuttle-fish or octopus was secured by my brother, and this we kept for examination, for we often bore home curiosities, marine and floral, from our excursions, and derived no little amusement at times from watching the habits of some of the former. Of these some mention will be made farther on.

On one occasion Kenneth, who was also fishing, struck hard at a good tug, and brought up his iron minus the hook. This was immediately succeeded by my wife also getting a good tug. She hauled in, and John Mackenzie lifted over a large flounder with Kenneth's hook in it.

After capturing in all some fifty flounders, and a good few codlings, we found it was time to return. I may say that on no other occasion did we catch so many. The ground became used up, I suppose, for the long-line fishermen resorted to it for bait, and no other place we tried afforded nearly such good sport.

Our long oars, or sweeps, had to be brought into use going home, as the wind failed us, or

was adverse, but we made our way safely back through the narrows with the flowing tide. As we passed along, John called our attention to a large boulder which lay on the shore of the lower part of the narrows. He told us that the legend attached to it was, that it was cast there by the giantess, or witch, or spirit of Ben Drovenish, the high, round hill which rose behind Drovenish Bay. Enmity had existed between the witch of Ben Drovenish and her sister, the witch of Suainaval, the high, big hill on the opposite shore. These amiable ladies were in the habit of pelting each other with fragments of rock torn from their own rugged fastnesses. Some of these fell short, and were to be found in various positions between the two hills; that to which our attention was directed being one of these.

My brother had with him a book which entered deeply into the subject of fairies, trolls, witches, and their congeners. This he was in the habit of reading to us sometimes in our expeditions, but the men looked grave and somewhat uneasy when these uncanny folk formed the subject of our conversation.

Once through the narrows, we looked out for our interesting young stranger, and shortly sighted him in a bay just above Kenneth's house. We hurried forward, and several times he showed on the surface; then, possibly alarmed at our boat, dashed off up the loch. He went at a tremendous pace, for in a very short time he showed again a long way off, and so on several times, thus indicating his route. We followed, and soon reached the lodge.

Alas! poor innocent! a few days after he was discovered, stranded and dead, among the rocks just inside the narrows. I think he was only about nine or ten feet long, but afforded a considerable amount of blubber to the fortunate finder. His whereabouts became unpleasantly notorious after a while, and we had to hurry past the spot when on our way outside.

Many such excursions as that above recorded we made, but it is unnecessary again to traverse in detail the route followed, so I will only refer to some of the points visited in another chapter.