

CHAPTER VII.

OTHER EXCURSIONS.

THE SANDY BAY OF REEF—COLLECTING CATTLE FOR A SWIM TO WINTER
 QUARTERS—PABHAY—OBSTREPEROUS BEHAVIOUR OF A CURLEW—
 FINE VIEW OF GALLON HEAD—RABBIT-SHOOTING IN LITTLE BERNERA
 —DESCRIPTION OF THE SCENERY—ISLAND CEMETERY—UIG—ADDERS
 —MARINE CURIOSITIES — CONGERS — CUDDIES — FINLAY'S OTTER
 STORY.

THE promontory of Reef was a place we frequently resorted to. It was distant from the lodge about six miles, and was opposite that extremity of the island of Wia Vohr, at the end farthest from the flounder fishing-ground. On the other side of the promontory there was a bay of the most beautiful light-coloured sand, which made a bold sweep of nearly a mile in length. Here were to be found the most exquisite-tinted little bivalve shells of various colours, I believe of the order 'Patella.' Leaving the lodge to take care of itself, we occasionally took our servants there for a picnic.

A very curious and interesting scene we once witnessed there when sailing into the bay from the island of Vacsey. This latter island affords fine wintering for cattle, besides being possessed of a very safe little land-locked inlet, where, I believe, the winter fishermen harbour their boats.

On the occasion referred to, the farmer was collecting his wild little cattle for transmission to their winter quarters. He, together with several shepherds, and a number of colleys and cattle of various hues, were all collected and lying about in picturesque attitudes on the usually quiet and almost deserted point. At first we hardly knew what they were doing, so quiet and still were they; but all suddenly started into active life, as a boat was seen to be doubling the point. In the briefest of space, men, cattle, and colleys seemed to be all mixed up amid the wildest shouting, barking, and lowing. Ever and anon a wild young bullock would start away with dogs in vigorous pursuit till they headed and turned him back. We especially noticed one wild thing of a dun colour which evinced a steady determination not to be herded with its fellows, and which



repeatedly broke away in spite of all efforts to restrain it. Out from the scramble, however, one by one, a bullock would appear with men clinging to it, and by main force was shoved and dragged over the rocks till he stood belly deep in the sea. The rope which was fastened round his horns would now be flung to a man sitting in the stern of a largish boat moored just off the shore, and be made secure by him. One thus followed another amidst the wildest din, till a sufficient number—four, I think,—were collected. The men then sprang on board, as many as could find room took their places in the stern, each holding on to one or more ropes, and keeping the heads of the cattle above water. The sail was hoisted, and, with a fresh breeze, the boat was soon under weigh and standing across the channel, here more than half-a-mile broad, to Vacsey, dragging the cattle attached after it.

At the first start there was some splashing and struggling, and heads went under; but they soon settled down, and were towed rapidly across. We saw them landed, and make their way over the rocks to the 'green fields and pastures new,' apparently none the worse for their enforced

swim, but well pleased with their new quarters. It was a wild and truly Highland scene, full of life, and movement, and noise, wildly picturesque both in the actors and their surroundings.

Beyond the sandy bay of Reef, and forming the outer island on the Gallon Head side of Loch Roag, was Pabhay. It was a longish sail or pull from the lodge, and we only visited it once, sailing to the outer extremity, and having to pull all the way back as the wind fell.

We landed in a nice little cove, and at once went to see a large cave, utilised at times, we understood, by fishermen from a distance. On one side was a little bay, the entrance of which had been roughly built-up, and formed a large lobster-pond, in which lobsters taken in the creels were placed till required for exportation.

Close to the mouth of the cave, a little inlet washed a very pebbly shore. The entrance to this inlet from the sea was under a roof composed of a jagged, serrated mass of rock which depended from the ground above, forming a natural bridge from twenty to thirty feet thick. The sea underneath was of the deepest green, and, looking out

from under the jagged roof, the open sea lay calm and blue on that fair day.

There are other caves farther down the island, but these we had not time to visit.

A curlew behaved in a most obstreperous manner, and so resented our intrusion on its domains as to make swoops in pretty close vicinity to our heads, crying shrilly all the time. It can hardly have had a nest, as the month was September, but in no other way could we account for its boldness and absence of all wariness, so contrary to the bird's nature. However, that may have been the cause, for nature is not quite regular there in some respects, as we found primroses fully blown on this occasion.

We had a fine view of Gallon Head from an elevated point at the end of the island, and, away beyond, of the seven hunters or Flannen Islands. Rare places for sea-birds' eggs are those wild, wind-swept islands out in the great Atlantic, but very difficult of access. Our friend at Morsgail made, I believe, several attempts to get there. He was a naturalist as well as a sportsman, and came up in the spring with the object of visiting these and other islands. I believe he

succeeded in landing, but not on every occasion.

The northern end of the island of Bernera, which is about seven miles long, and, as I have explained, divides Loch Roag into two parts, was the object of one of our excursions. Situated in a little rocky glen, overlooking the narrow sound which separates Bernera from the beautiful island of Little Bernera—tenanted only by the dead, and numbers of rabbits—lies the secluded but considerable farm-house of Bostadh.

The widow of one of the 'estate' officers had her residence here, along with a son and daughter, and she kindly placed two or three rooms at our disposal, for we intended to spend a couple of nights there, see the beauties of the place, and have a crack at the rabbits; it being too far to come and go in one day—for me, at any rate.

The morning had been wild and stormy, but it cleared up about eleven, and we determined to carry our intentions into effect. Instead, however, of running along the west coast of Bernera and so in by the sound at that end, we more prudently decided to double the south end of the island in the neighbourhood of the standing-stones of Callarnish, and run up by the east

side, as it was more protected, though a little longer distance. In all it was a water-journey of about thirteen miles, which we satisfactorily completed in time for me to drop the impedimenta at the farm-house, cross over, and get a few rabbits the same afternoon.

Our beds, in recesses in the wall, were primitive, the wall-paper singular and interesting, being composed of newspapers, old posters (some in Gaelic), sale-bills, &c., and there was an accumulation of what Lord Palmerston (I think it was) has so well defined as 'matter in the wrong place.' But we met with a kindly welcome, and that atoned for what need not be dwelt on. We had our own cooked provisions, and the bed-linen and blankets were clean and 'unoccupied.'

The next day we all, including servants, crossed over the narrow sound, and turned loose on the island for the day, fortunately a beautiful one. I think Mr. Black must have had this spot in his mind's eye when he located the beautiful Sheila, the Princess of Thule, and her father on the island of Barva, and added, of course, what was necessary to her surroundings. Wild roses and honeysuckle were gathered in the little glen

behind the house, and the lovely Little Bernera was, in many parts, bespangled with wild flowers of various descriptions. We found the elicampane there.

No inappropriate spot was this which the rude, untutored dwellers on the wild neighbouring shore had from time immemorial selected as the last resting-place for their dead. The place of burial was a sandy tract overlooking the sound, and it may be that the nature of the soil, easily worked, or its dryness, so different from the peat, had as much to do with its choice for a cemetery as the beauty of the situation. Very difficult of access, though, it must be in wild weather, and burials sometimes unduly postponed. No care seems to be taken of the place, and the rough stones, raised by some sorrowing relative, lie about in all directions or smothered in sand.

‘Some mute, inglorious Milton here may rest,’

or the chief of a clan, but, equally with the humblest fisher lad, the particular spot which holds his remains will be sought in vain after a short time. Mr. Anderson Smith refers to a chapel of ‘black ladies’ or nuns, which at one

time occupied a site on Little Bernera. I was not aware of this at the time of my visit.

The breaking sea and the sea-birds' cries made Nature's wild melody over the unrecorded dead; rabbits gambolled about the uncared-for graves, and nettles and other high weeds spread luxuriant growth around, but the sorrow of the loving, genuine though it be, is productive of no visible interest in the sepulchres of those they loved.

I confined my investigations of the land to the eastern portion of the island, and principally of the sandy promontory in that direction, for here the rabbit-burrows were most plentiful, and easily worked with ferrets. A good many lie out in the grass and among the flowers, but there were not nearly so many as I expected. I had been told of 'thousands,' but from evident signs I conjectured they were pretty well kept down by the neighbouring keepers and others. However, I did fairly well, and, in all, got fourteen couples. My brother was not with us, as he had not yet arrived north.

While I was thus employed, my wife sauntered away through the island till she reached the farther shore, and I transcribe her account from

an old letter to a friend, which has been placed at my disposal.

‘The island and its surroundings are beautiful, open to the Atlantic on one side, which has, in places, washed it into lovely little sandy bays, and in others torn the rocky sides into caves and chasms. The island lies at the very entrance to Loch Roag, the rocky, storm-beaten point of Carloway being to the right, and the other point, Gallon Head, to the left. Somewhat to the left, too, lies a high, rocky islet, “The Old Hill,” a great pet of mine. One sees it from almost every high hill. Such a beauty it is, seen in the distance; so grand and yet so soft. It always seems wrapped in some soft haze of colour. I have always longed to sail out to it, but J. would not allow it. At Little Bernera I went to the nearest point to it, and stood on the highest crag of the island, and gazed my fill at it I wish I could describe all the wildness; no one but myself visible, only gulls screaming and scolding. Huge detached rocks at a little distance, with the Atlantic waves dashing against them, and covering their rugged sides with snowy foam; then the distant hills of Uig, looking so

grim in the evening light. The island itself just here is covered with short, soft turf, and, in a hollow at a little distance, lies a small loch, with reeds and a few water-lilies. I might go on for pages, and not tell all.'

I do not think I can add to this true and heartfelt description.

On the following day we returned with a brisk breeze blowing, a side wind which made some of the party uncomfortable. After rounding the southern extremity of Bernera, we had to take to the oars, as it was dead ahead.

During the first two years of our tenancy, the shootings of Uig were unlet, and in consequence we had permission to fish the loch of Croistan, of which I shall speak hereafter in a chapter on fishing, and also to pay a visit to Uig, taking up our residence for two or three days in the fine lodge there.

A sail of about six miles landed us at Meavaig, and thence we proceeded by a beautiful pass through high cliffs till we attained the open ground above the lovely sands of Uig and the rugged indented outline of the outer bay.

The lodge overlooks this, and the salmon

stream, which, flowing below, wanders away through the whitey yellow sand. The lodge is new and commodious, and suitable for the accommodation of a considerable party and establishment.

I have a grateful recollection of the excellent mushrooms we found on the green slopes around the lodge. Happily for us, these had remained unpicked, for the Gaelic stomach, so delighting in full-flavoured meats, has no appetite for what, to the Sassenach, is such a delicacy.

This is probably the most picturesque part of the Lews. The hills, rising to some fifteen hundred feet, are very rugged, covered with rocky knobs and massive crags breaking through the grass and heather, looking thoroughly storm-worn. But it is a fine shooting for deer, and is said to be good for about five-and-twenty stags, besides some hinds.

The year following, it was taken by some acquaintances of my own, and I think the gentlemen of the party accounted for about that number. But it is only those who care for sport and wild scenery, and are able to exist contentedly without the society of other than their own party affords, to whom it would prove attractive, for it is very remote.

The salmon fishing is fair and sea-trout are very plentiful at times, the river which flows below the lodge giving easy access to a fine loch, girt with rocky hills and crags, and on it are boats for the use of the lodge.

Rather more than a mile, in the midst of the moor behind the lodge, is a rocky gully which contains a cave, formerly the haunt of some desperado who was said to have successfully defended himself in its narrow entrance against the attacks of a large body of men armed in those days with broadswords only. Names and dates were not forthcoming, only the main facts as handed down by tradition.

There were other present occupants of the moor with whom we formed a more intimate acquaintance.

We saw several adders, and killed one or two. My English lad wished to strike one with the iron hook attached to the carrying-strap of one of the gillies. The latter objected, however, declaring that he would not use it again if so employed, as it was impossible to say what poison might be absorbed by it and communicated to him.

A soup made of the adder which has bitten a

man, and taken internally, is said by them to be a remedy. Of the serpent stone—a round stone with a hole in it—of which Mr. Anderson Smith speaks, I have no personal experience, but no doubt it is as efficacious as the soup. Adder fat is a specific in Devon, and Miss Gordon Cumming says that the head of an adder tied to a string and dipped in water is also considered one.

We spent very pleasantly two or three days at Uig, and returned, as we had come, by boat from Meavaig in preference to driving all the way, a distance by land of about twelve miles.

Many such excursions we made by boat to various points outside the narrows; but those I have described will serve to indicate the nature of the island coast and sea in and about Loch Roag.

The narrows themselves were the object of many trips, for, besides seals and sea-birds, here were to be found many of those 'common objects of the sea-shore' which are so interesting to observe in their native haunts.

About half-way through was a spot under some little rugged crags, where we often anchored, for here was a veritable marine aquarium. One at least of

us was never wearied of peering down into those clear depths in search of the hidden treasures of the sea, or examining the shore for those left exposed by the subsidence of the tide.

On the faces of the rocks, from low tide-mark to some three or four feet above, depended in all directions flabby and not very inviting-looking masses of dull-coloured fleshy substances. Immediately below the surface these same shapeless things became transformed, as if touched by a fairy's wand, into the most gracefully-shaped and beautifully-coloured objects. From palest pink to deepest red, from faintest yellow to brightest orange, interspersed with exquisite shades of lavender and purest white, waved these lovely beds of sea-anemones.

As far down as the eye could trace, on every stone and fragment of disjointed rock, they revealed their beauty in crowded masses. And in their close vicinity long waving bands of sea-weed, giving to every movement of the tide, held, attached to their pendicles, shells of various kinds and colours. Star-fish of different orders, from the common five-fingered, to the beautiful sun-star and the bright red thread-like brittle star-

fish, adorned the depths; while, farther out, sea-urchins, as varied in size as colour, gave added interest to the explorer's investigations.

We foraged here for specimens to take home and be examined at leisure. Hermit crabs in their stolen homes afforded us great amusement, especially one little fellow who appeared to become tame, and made his appearance outside his cell, whenever a smart rap was given to the basin in which he was located.

Notably, too, on one occasion, what apparently was a bubble on the surface of the water sprang, as if by magic, into life. Assuming the form of a tiny basket with a handle, it quickly threw out a series of little legs, and the bubble developed into an active little jelly-fish, which we afterwards ascertained was one of the *Medusæ*.

Very wonderful and interesting it was to observe the metamorphosis of forms, apparently dull and uninteresting objects, into creatures of life and beauty.

Returning one day from the head of the loch, where we had been collecting oysters and searching for such marine curiosities as might present themselves, at some distance among the rocks an

object presented itself whose unusual movements attracted our attention. It—whatever it was—was jumping and plunging in a most singular fashion. So we landed a lad to investigate the matter. On his arrival near the object his movements denoted excitement. He was seen to seize big stones, and dash them about frantically, and was unmistakably in strife with the thing. Wild-cat, among other enemies, was suggested. Next he was seen to go to the shore, than return armed with a piece of wood, and renew the strife, and apparently brought it to a successful issue, for we next observed him dragging the thing towards the boat. Only when he came near did we discover that it was a large conger eel, which had been left by the receding tide, and stranded among the rocks.

John and some of the others expressed their determination to eat the conger, but Kenneth, on being appealed to, uttered the single word, 'Beast,' with intense disgust. It was explained to us that he came of a family which had never approved of such meat, and he inherited the ancestral dislike. There are others like him both in and out of the Lews.

Among other employments we sometimes fished for cuddies—the fry of the sythe or coal-fish—occasionally pulling them out as fast as we could throw the bait in. Compared with the capture of the lordly salmon and the noble sea-trout, the taking of little cuddies seems sport for children. So it is. We have been told by one who ought to know that ‘claret is tippie for boys, port for men, but brandy for heroes.’ Yet, no doubt, the hero would so far unbend as to comfort his lofty soul with port, or even claret, should the nobler liquor not be obtainable. So we, proud salmon-fishers, condescended from our high estate occasionally to fish for the humble cuddy, in absence of the nobler fish, or when its season was past. An estimable little fish indeed it is, when nicely fried, especially with a little lemon and red pepper.

We tried once or twice for otters, but not successfully. The keeper’s eldest son, a bright boy of about ten or eleven, who in the first year of our residence had quite established himself as my wife’s small henchman, told her, among other things, a story of an otter, which I shall try to reproduce as it was told by him. This lad, Fin-

lay by name, is now growing into a fine youth, to judge by the description given of him by his father. He says, in a recent letter,

‘My boy Finlay is now grown very good, sir. He shall be an able lad. He is fully five feet ten inches, and shall be very active, sir. He is seventeen years old on the thirteenth of November first, sir.’

We ascertained that his story was true, as regarded the main facts, though he had appended in the last sentence an imaginary sequel of his own. His story ran as follows, and it must be remembered that his English was yet not very fluent :

‘An’ there wass a mon, an’ it was cauld, cauld, in the time of snow, an’ he went to the burn, an’ he saw an otter, an’ the otter had come there to look for the feesh, an’ ’—Finlay now gesticulated violently, representing a man as if clutching at an object—‘he at the otter, an’ caught her by the tail, an’ over the shoulder with her for a big fling to knock her head against a stone. An’ the otter, she oop wi’ herself an’ caught the mon by the shoulder, an’ the mon he couldn’t away with her whatever. An’ he called, an’ called to his

wife to bring the spade, and hit the otter, but no to touch him. An' his wife she took the spade, and she hit at the otter, but she hit so hard, she knocked down the mon, an' away went the otter, an' never, never wass seen no more. An' the mon he lay there.'

'And was he killed?' we asked, as the boy paused.

'No,' said Finlay, 'he was no killed. He got up, and to his wife he says, "Never see your face no more."'

One of the first things Finlay did on our first arrival was to conduct the 'leddy' to view a snipe's nest (deserted, I fear) with three eggs in it; and also to inspect some troutlets which he had discovered in a small pool in the burn. In fact he became her self-constituted henchman, and assisted in the gathering of such moor spoils as fern-leaves, heath, scabious, sundew, bog-asphodel, milkwort, and the more rarely met with pinguicula, or butterwort, with other floral treasures to adorn our moorland home.