

CHAP. XIX.

ON THE MOORS.

Inhabitants of Heather-land. — Gnats and Midges. — Rœcreations. — Eccentricities of Midges. — A Sketcher's Miseries. — Queer Head-gear. — The venomous Beast. — Mice and Moles. — A Curiosity in Natural History. — The Mole and the Campbells. — A Mountain Burn — Its Birth and Career. — Trees in Heather-land. — The Lady of the Woods. — The Rowan-tree. — Beeches and Wytch Elms. — The Berry Family. — Ferns and other Plants. — Bog-cotton, the Cana of the Poets. — Eagles. — Ornithology of the District. — Natural History of the same. — Scenery of the Moors. — Maps on Boulders.

By the time that I have come to the end of my legends of Beinn-an-tuire, I have placed upon my sketching-block that last shade of purply-blue with which, in harmonious conjunction with other colours, I have endeavoured to represent him as he now appears to the modern descendants of Fingal and the Bruce, shorn of his forest clothing and his terrible wild boar, but shaggy with heath, and his sides seamed by mountain torrents. But only a portion of my landscape is yet completed. Sit with me awhile, yet a little longer, in the grateful shade of this great boulder, and close beside this fern-



Guthbert Bede, del.

Hanhart, Chromo-lith.

hung, musical burnie, while I fill-in the many little details of my sketch of heather-land.

We are exceedingly fortunate in being able to sit here in perfect peace and enjoyment, without being



OUT ON THE MOORS.

irritated beyond endurance by the bloodthirsty attacks of swarms of midges and gnats. What shooters and sketchers with sensitive cuticles have often to go through upon a Scotch moor, in the broad sunlight, can

only be equalled by what is savagely endured during the darkness of night by the unhappy occupants of a foul Highland lodging. Christopher North has devoted one hundred and ninety pages of his "Recreations" to the subject of "the Moors," in which he has treated them with all his great power and minuteness, though with his usual discursiveness and offensive egotism; and yet in those one hundred and ninety pages there is not one word about gnats and midges. In one passage, it is true, where he is combating the notion that the moors are solitary, whereas they teem with animal life, he says: "Your great clumsy splay feet are bruising to death a batch of beetles. See that spider, whom you have widowed, running up and down your elegant leg in distraction and despair, bewailing the loss of a husband, *who, however savage to the ephemerals, had always smiled sweetly upon her.* Meanwhile, your shoulders have crushed a colony of small red ants, settled in a moss city beautifully roofed with lichens — and that accounts for the sharp tickling behind your ear, which you keep scratching, no Solomon, in ignorance of the cause of that effect. Should you sit down — we must beg to draw a veil over your hurdies, which at the moment extinguish a fearful amount of animal life — creation may be said to groan under them; and, insect as you are yourself, you are defrauding millions of insects of their little day." Beetles, spiders, and

ants; but not a word about gnats or midges, without which the true picture of a Scotch moor would not be complete. Certainly, such pests could not be classed among the "Recreations" of Christopher North, much more of a person with a southern skin. But, as the great Kit has swooped upon ants and spiders, why did he omit those more virulent enemies of man, the swarms of gnats and midges—unless, indeed, those Argyleshire moors that he was describing were free from the pest?

It is within the bounds of possibility, for, as entomologists will tell you, the habits of gnats and midges are exceedingly peculiar; and while they may be swarming on one spot, another more favoured spot, within almost a stone's throw, will be freed from their persecution. Mr. Weld describes this to have been the case in Caithness, where the midges were entirely absent from the banks of the Thurso, but swarmed on the Brawl moors in a way which he very graphically describes, and in such myriads, that lingering over luncheon was impossible to one not gifted with a pachydermatous skin; sitting down was out of the question, even standing still for a moment put the powers of endurance to the severest test; and it was very easy to believe in the tradition of the Persian army that besieged the city of Nisibis being put to flight by the mighty clouds of gnats which settled on them at the

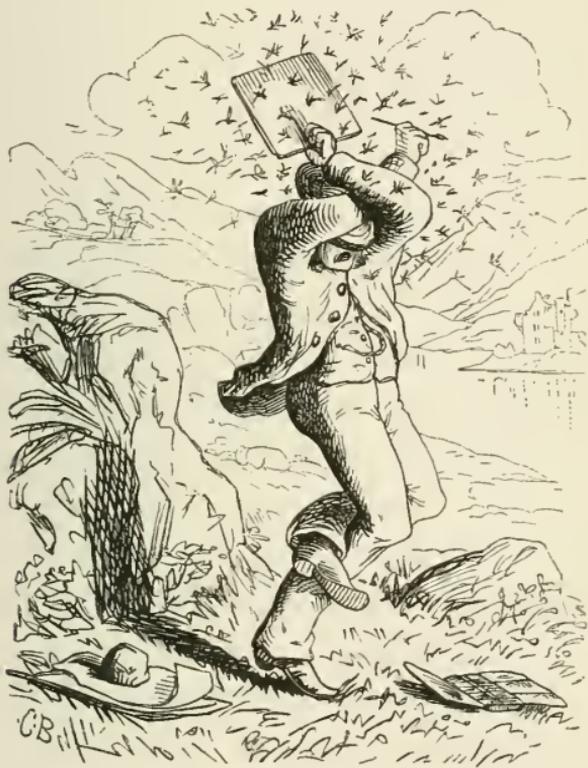
earnest solicitation of holy St. Jacobus.* Afterwards, when Mr. Weld endeavoured to sketch Ben Stack, in Sutherlandshire, he found it impossible to do so, for no sooner had he sat down than up rose millions of midges, which sent him "reeling down the craggy steep, half mad." †

Therefore I might account myself particularly fortunate in being able to sit and sketch for hours together on the Glencreggan moors, without being molested by a single obnoxious specimen of entomology. Hence my description of the South Argyleshire moors will resemble Christopher North's accounts of those of North Argyleshire, in this one particular — it will not contain any gnats or midges; for they did not make themselves sufficiently apparent to me to call for any particular notice or anathemas. Thus my little illustration of one of the pleasures attendant upon sketching in the Highlands was not founded upon any personal and uncomfortable recollection, but nevertheless truly depicts a very common occurrence, and one which, while it drives artists to the verge of frenzy, also compels them to adopt mosquito-curtain veils and other extraordinary head-gear, partially protected by which shrouding they may paint under difficulties. One of Mr. Leech's inimitable sketches in "Punch"

* Two Months in the Highlands, pp. 81, 82.

† Idem, p. 265.

will doubtless be called to mind, where two artists in the Highlands are thus represented with their heads wonderfully done up in gnat-defiers, in which are glazed eyelet-holes and a mouth-piece, through which a sanatory pipe may be smoked. And the present



ONE OF THE PLEASURES OF MOORLAND SKETCHING.

writer, too, exhibited in the same publication the mode in which the ingenious Mr. Flyrod, when out fishing, protected his face from the insects, by covering his head with the net-work of his landing-net; only it unfortu-

nately happened, that when Mr. Flyrod had a run, the handle of the landing-net, which stuck out like a pig-tail behind him, caught its hooked end in a bough, and nearly strangled its owner, whom a great fish was tugging up-stream.

If we are to dread anything as we sit here on this Glencreggan moor, it will not be a wild boar from yonder Wild Boar's Mountain, whose only wild animals now-a-days are a few roes and rabbits, many hares and badgers, polecats and weasels, and (it is said) a wild cat or two — but it will be the venomous adder, which (together with the harmless ring-snakes and slow-worms) will be found basking in the sun on these moors, and sometimes attaining a length of more than two feet. It is quite as well, therefore, before we make a long *sederunt* on a Highland moor, to first inspect the ground for snakes that “mean wenom,” like those that Mark Tapley encountered in his Transatlantic Eden.

I was quoting from Christopher North just now concerning the non-solitude of a Scotch moor, when deserted by other human beings than yourself, but teeming with animal life, zoology, entomology and ornithology. Pursuing his subject, he says: “A man among mountains is often surrounded on all sides with mice and moles. What cozy nests do the former construct at the roots of heather, among tufts of grass in

the rushes, and the moss on the greensward. As for the latter, though you think you know a mountain from a molehill, you are much mistaken; for what is a mountain, in many cases, but a collection of mole-hills?" Professor Wilson wrote this sentence on a moor in North Argyleshire; and it is very remarkable, that, at the time when he penned it, it would have been utterly inapplicable to the moors in South Argyleshire; for, except within a few miles of Tarbert, there was not a mole to be found throughout the whole of Cantire. The author of the "Statistical Survey" of the country eighteen miles south of Tarbert, says: "The mole has not as yet made its appearance in the parish; but having several years ago passed the narrow isthmus of Tarbert, it is gradually progressing to the south, and will in all probability ere long overrun the whole peninsula of Kintyre." But he adds in a foot-note: "Since writing the above, the mole has advanced into the parish. It is a very singular circumstance in the natural history of the mole, that it travels by the hills and colonises the sterile districts before it attacks cultivated land." This was published in 1843.

This fact may certainly be classed among the "Curiosities of Natural History." The mole has done its best to take the place of the extinct animals, such as wild boars and wolves, which are said to have been formerly prevalent in Cantire, having their abiding-

places in those forests whose traces are still to be seen in many a morass. The tradition of the Highlanders in Cantire regarding the mole connected its non-appearance with the existence of the clan Campbell. The moles were to drive the Campbells before them and take possession of their estates; and when the moles had reached the Mull, not a Campbell would remain throughout the length and breadth of Cantire. Such was the tradition and prophecy; and though never a mole was seen till about twenty years ago, yet they have spread through the district with amazing rapidity from Tarbert to the Mull, but have altogether failed to drive the Campbells from Cantire. When the prophecy matched the mole against the Scotchman, the prehensile powers of the latter were not taken into consideration.

But while you are listening to these curious "zoological recreations" touching moles and midges, I am working away at my water-colour drawing, and endeavouring to place on paper the counterpart of the landscape before us. What can be better for my purpose than our immediate foreground? Here before us is one of those many little glens that seam the hill-sides; and down it leaps one of those numerous burns, or streamlets, that find their way to Barr River, and will presently mingle their pure water with the salt waves of the Atlantic. The burnie takes its rise in a

black peaty hollow on the hill top, where there is one of those innumerable mountain-tarns, whose dark sluggish waters creep around islands of moss-hags and tumps of rushes. When it issues from thence it filters through mosses a yard or so deep, and only betrays its presence by yonder line of greenest verdure. Then it makes its first appearance in the world of sunshine, and tumbles over a bank, or, in the more poetical words of Burns,

“White o'er the linn the burnie pours;”

and makes a tiny waterfall that plashes musically into as tiny a basin, girdled with plumes upon plumes of feathery ferns. The heather-bells, pink and white and crimson, are intermingled with the ferns; and the thick mossy turf rounds off all the edges of the peat banks, so that nothing is hard and sharp and angular save the bits of granite that the stream has washed clear; and the belted bees are making a pleasant murmuring about

“Those easy-curving banks of bloom,
That lent the windward air an exquisite perfume.”

Here and there the burn is so narrow and burrows so low that the banks nearly close over it. Its waters look a dark brown that is nearly black, where they show the peaty channel, and where its banks fall away and suffer it to broaden out into a little two-yard wide

river, with the projecting rocks for stepping-stones. Then it loses itself under ground again, with its

“Low murmurs filling mossy dells;”

and dances into sight, tripping down a stony slope in a way that shows that the pure mountain air has favoured its muscular development. You will remember Ten-nyson’s beautiful simile, where he speaks, in “*Enid*,” of

“Arms, on which the standing muscle sloped, —
As slopes a wild brook o’er a little stone,
Running too vehemently to break upon it.”

This Glencreggan burnie shows us the justice of the simile; for where it trips down that stony slope it seems like the muscular arm of some mountain giant, whose skin is as white as a maiden’s. Then it runs on, now amid rocks, and now amid turf and fern and heather, until it takes a waterfall leap into yonder birch coppice in the valley, where

“The braes ascend like lofty wa’s,
O’erhung wi’ fragrant spreading shaws.”

The trees are but scanty in heather-land, except where the shelter of the glens has afforded them a snug place to flourish in. The species that we then meet with are the oak, ash, mountain-ash, hazel, birch, wych-elm, alder, Scotch fir, and larch; but the plantations are but few, and the landscape, in its general aspect, is barren

of wood. On the other side of Beinn-an-tuirc, woods of fine old forest timber are still to be met with.

The birch (next to the Scotch fir) is one of the most characteristic trees in Highland scenery. It has been well said by a late writer *: "Those who are familiar with our mountain scenery will acknowledge how much of its romantic beauty is derived from this most graceful, airy tree, so appropriately styled by Coleridge 'The Lady of the Woods.' In every situation its presence is felt as adding a charm to the scene, whether waving on the brow of the cliff, with its light transparent form seen quivering against the sky, or down on the shore of the broad loch, to which it forms a most harmonious foreground. . . . The weeping variety is the one that prevails in the mountain districts of Scotland and Wales. It may be remarked that in ascending our loftiest mountains the birch is the last tree that we miss on our upward path, for it continues with us to heights far above the level at which even the Scotch fir disappears." The elegant shrub called the dwarf-birch also grows in boggy places in the Highlands. Strips of birch bark twisted together make the Highlander's torch. His favourite "Rowan-tree" is the mountain-ash, which he deems mighty against the powers of witchcraft and warlocks. The writer whom

* "Our Woodlands, Heaths, and Hedges," by W. S. Coleman; a delightful book.

I have just quoted says: "Between the trim suburban garden and the grim Highland steep there is, doubtless, a vast constitutional difference; so that, in general, an object harmonising with the one would seem to be totally discordant with the other: yet the mountain-ash oversteps the difficulty, and with easy grace accommodates itself to either situation. But ornamental as it is to the villa, we fancy there are few who would not prefer it in its native locality as a wild mountaineer." Of another favourite tree of heather-land, the larch, Major-General Stewart gives some curious particulars.

"The larch is now spreading over the whole kingdom, and has proved a valuable acquisition to the produce of many barren moors in the Highlands, where the climate is found more favourable for this species of pine than in the plains. The wood is of excellent quality. The Atholl frigate, built entirely of Atholl larch, is expected to show that it will prove a good substitute for oak in ship-building. The larch was accidentally brought to Scotland by a gentleman whom I have had occasion to mention more than once. Mr. Menzies, of Culdares, was in London in 1737, and hearing of a beautiful pine shrub recently imported from the Alps, procured four plants: he gave two to the Duke of Atholl, which are now in full vigour at Dunkeld, and may be called the parents of all the larch in the kingdom; he gave a third to

Mr. Campbell, of Monzie, and kept the fourth for himself, which was unfortunately cut down forty years ago. It had then been planted forty-five years, and had grown to seven feet nine inches in circumference. The Duke of Atholl's plants were placed in a green-house at Dunkeld, where they did not thrive, and were thrown out, when they immediately began to grow, and quickly showed the consequence of being placed in a proper climate. The Duke of Atholl sold a thousand larch trees of seventy years' growth for 5000*l*. If they had been planted and grown regularly, they would not have covered more than nine Scotch acres of the light soil on which they thrive best, allowing twenty-two feet square for each tree, more than ample space for the larch." *

Cantire can boast of magnificent beeches. Some we have already noticed in the Glenbarr plantations, and we shall see a fine wood of them on our road to Tarbert, on the eastern side of the loch. Notwithstanding what Gilpin says to the contrary, the beech is one of the most picturesque trees that we have; its smooth, shining, silvery-grey stem (like the under side of a willow leaf) affords a grateful study to the painter, especially when it is dappled o'er with clinging moss and lichens.

* Sketches of the Highlanders, vol. i. Appendix, p. liii.

The true elms of Scotland are —

“Wych-elms that counterchange the floor.”

Their branches are more spreading and pendulous than the English elm, which in Worcestershire is indigenous, —and is seen in such profusion that it has obtained the name of “the Worcestershire weed.”

There is a family of shrubs in heather-land that are heath-like in their appearance, and grow in tufts among the heather,—

“Mid muirs and mosses many O!”

and on which the grouse and moor-fowl feed. The leading members of this Berry family are named crow-berry, cowberry, cloudberry, bearberry, blaeberry, bil-berry, and cranberry, whose brilliant fruit-clusters form the choice food of grouse-land, and whose creamy waxen blossoms and fresh green foliage may be seen intermixed with the heather at elevations of 4000 feet above the level of the sea.

I have spoken more than once in general terms of the beauty and luxuriance of the ferns of heather-land. They deserve more particular mention, for in this district there is a good and varied field for the botanist. *Imprimis*, the *Osmunda regalis*, the pride of British ferns, is scattered in frequent patches among the common bracken, more especially in the neighbourhood of Beinn-an-tuire. There the botanist may profitably go to gather

“ Fair ferns and flowers, and chiefly that tall fern,
 So stately, of the Queen *Osmunda* named;
 Plant lovelier, in its own retired abode,
 On Grasmere’s beach, than Naiad by the side
 Of Grecian brook, or lady of the Mere,
 Sole-sitting by the shores of old romance.”

Beside ferns of the *Lastræa* tribe, we shall also find the pretty *Cystopteris dentata* and *fragilis*, the *Hymenophyllum Wilsoni*, the elegant *Polystichum lonchitis*, the graceful “lady-fern,” and the Green and Black Maiden-hair, which last-named fern the old Highland dames sometimes boil down into a tea, and warrant it a good remedy for coughs and colds.

When we get down to the sea-shore we shall see the plants that are peculiar to that locality; but up here in heather-land we find several species that will repay the botanist for the search. The bur-marigold (*Bidens tripartita*) grows abundantly on the mossy ground. Some of the larger St. John’s wort (*Hypericum Androsæmum*) is found among the wooded cliffs. In the salt marshes there is the water drop-wort (*Ænanthe pimpinelloides*), and in the peat-bogs and tarns on the tops of the moors, the resort of the wild duck and her brood, there is the white water-lily (*Nymphæa alba*) in abundance. And among the quagmires and heathy morasses we shall find patches of the Cana, or “bog-cotton,” to whose white feathery down Ossian likens the breasts of the “high-bosomed Strina-Dona:”

“If on the heath she moved, her breast was whiter than the down of Cana.”* Indeed, the simile is by no means an uncommon one with a “minstrel of the north countrie.” In Macpherson’s “Melodies from the Gaelic,” for example, the enraptured lover asks —

“O, what is fairer than the Cana
 Waving in the breeze,
 When summer laughs in flow’ry pride,
 And verdure clothes the trees?
 My Mary’s snowy neck and breast,
 By many a lurking Cupid press’d,
 Are fairer than the downy Cana
 Waving in the breeze.”

The same idea is elsewhere used; and in one poem the complexion of the young lady is compared to the Cana and mountain-ash berry, which are the rose and lily of heather-land: —

“Her cheeks were like the rowan red,
 Her neck was like the Cana fair.”

And in a farewell to the “Braes o’ Laggan,” the poet sings: —

“Fare ye well, ye spreading mosses,
 Waving with the Cana’s plume.”

This beautiful plant, which is sometimes also called *Cannach*, abounds in the Highland mosses. Its blossom forms a spherical tuft about the size of a common wal-

* *Cath-loda*, Duan the Second.

nut, of a white downy substance like cotton, which is supported by a slender rushy stem about a foot high.

What bird is that winging its high flight towards yonder hill? Can it be an eagle? "aiblins not." Such destruction has been dealt towards them, that they are now rarely to be met with in these parts.* Yet John Macallum told us that he saw one not many weeks since, but soaring too high for him to get a shot,—a very happy circumstance. But though a rare visitor, the eagle is not yet extinct; and the golden eagle, the common or white-tailed eagle, the rock eagle, and the osprey or sea-eagle, are still to be seen in this part of heather-land. The ornithology of the district † also comprises the merlin ‡, kestrel, sparrow-hawk, gos-hawk, buzzard, hooded crow, carrion crow, raven, Cornish chough, magpie, cuckoo, grey owl, barn owl, brown owl, and many smaller birds, such as blackbirds, thrushes,

* "Not one fowler of fifty thousand has in all his days shot an eagle. That royal race seems nearly extinct in Scotland."—*Recreations of C. North*, vol. i. p. 92.

† The ornithology is given on the authority of the Rev. D. Macdonald, and the Rev. J. Macfarlane. Their complete catalogue comprehends upwards of one hundred various birds that visit the district around Glencreggan.

‡ The merlin will sometimes hover round the sportsman, and "has been known to strike down a wounded grouse considerably larger than himself, within range of gun, and, without compunction or delay, quietly commence tearing up the prey."—*Letters from the Highlands*, by James Conway (1859), p. 55.

linnets, goldfinches, fieldfares, wrens, tomtits, yellow-hammers, reed-sparrows, wheatears, whincats, swallows, sedge-warblers, wagtails, blackcaps, larks, &c. Of birds that may afford sport to the shooter, this district supplies the following:—Black-game and grouse, partridges, woodcocks, snipe, golden plovers*, landrails, curlews, rock and wood pigeons, wild geese, wild swans, solan geese, wild ducks, mallard, teal, widgeon, herons, cormorants, and various kinds of gulls, puffins, auks, guillemots, &c. The pheasant does not seem to do well here, and is only met with in small numbers in places (as at Largie) where great pains have been taken to induce it to breed. The quail is only an occasional visitant; and the bittern, which old people remember as a common bird, is never, or but very rarely, seen,—owing, probably, to the better drainage and improved agriculture of the district. It is also said that the red grouse have diminished in numbers from the same cause. There are some birds, too, such as the nocturnal goat-sucker, which are plentiful on the eastern coast of Cantire, and are not found on the western.

The lochs and tarns of our heather-land, for the most part, teem with trout in all their variety, but

* I “have often heard in this country of an old Scottish act of parliament for encouragement to destroy the green plover, or peewit, which (as said) is therein called the *ungrateful* bird; for that it came to Scotland to breed, and then returned to England with its young to feed the enemy.” — *Letters from Scotland* (1754), Letter VII.



Gulbert Bede, del^t

Hanhart, Chromo-lith.

there are no char, pike, or perch. The salmon and salmon-trout keep to the rivers. The salmon, as I have before mentioned, are not caught above twenty pounds in weight. Otters often make their way up to these moorland lochs at a time when approaching family cares warn them to seek a sequestered home, and there remain until they are able to take their little family down to the sea-side. Stoats, weasels, polecats, and martins also make their dwelling on these moors, and doubtless cause many anxious moments to the rabbits and hares and the young mothers of the grouse tribe. Thus it will be seen that Christopher North's protest against the solitude of moors is not without foundation.

By this time I have completed my sketch of heather-land, having painted-in those many details that make up the wide landscape. Here are the ferns, the heather, the burnie, the coppicing, the winding line of trees that mark the course of the deep burrowing Barr river, the level road up the valley through Barr glen, the long ranges of hills overtopping and overlapping each other, and Beinn-an-tuirc in the distance. One or two white farm-houses, with slated roofs, are seen in the valley, and by their neat and cared-for appearance show that the present proprietor of the Barr estates is improving the property in the spirit of the age. We also see on the opposite hill-side, some scattered cot-

tages, with their whitewashed walls and dark thatch, from which rise tiny columns of smoke. The black patches near to them are peat-stacks, built with little bricks of peat, as we see in the fens of Lincolnshire and Huntingdonshire. Here and there we see evident morasses and quagmires, where there are moss-hags and tumps of rushes and bog-cotton, and where the verdure is of the greenest. Well-cultivated corn-fields lie down in the valley between the heathery hills, and there is many a little

“Meadow gem-like chased
In the brown wild;”

like that seen by Enid and Geraint after his fight with the three bandits—where the softly-rounded sheep, and the tiny shaggy oxen make moving spots of colour and light. And among the red-brown moors of heather-land, there are also many irregular patches of pasture that give diversity to the hues of the hill-sides — plots of green turf that have been so closely nibbled by the sheep, that not a daisy is to be seen upon them, so that they present

“A look that is sheepish, and what in most ways I call
An appearance that’s certainly most lack-a-daisycal.”

A conspicuous feature of heather-land may be remarked in

“These mossy rocks,
These lichen’d stones, all purple-tinged with blue;” *

* D. M. Moir.

the great boulders that are scattered here and there over the moors, on whose white and shining sides the lichens have mapped green and yellow continents as fanciful in form as Scotland herself. They contribute famously to those "bits of foreground" that delight the sketcher's heart; and while they afford us sermons in stones, also show us maps on boulders.