

## CHAP. XXVI.

## COMMON OBJECTS ON AND OFF THE SEA-SHORE.

Otters. — Their Dens. — Otter-hunting. — Dogs. — The Master-otter, or King of the Otters. — The Note of an Otter. — Seals and Seal-shooting. — Fish varieties. — The Scotch Minister interrupted. — Lobsters and Crabs. — Imprisoned Voyagers. — The Gulf-stream. — The Voyage of the Seed. — Tropical Plants on Highland Shores. — Hugh Miller. — Dr. Neill. — Rev. C. Kingsley. — Mr. Campbell. — Westerly Currents and Gales. — Unsafe Anchorage. — Luminous Appearance of the Sea. — Medusæ. — Poetical Extracts.

THE *débris* of rocks on the Atlantic shore at the Glencreggan Undercliff was a favourite resort of the otter, one of the few wild animals now remaining to us that were found in the British Isles at the time of the Roman invasion. The otters frequent those parts of the coast where mountain-streams run into the sea, and where caves and fissures in the rocks, or large stones loosely scattered upon the shore, afford them secure hiding places. Into these rocky recesses and caves, which the Cantire people call their *dens* (*geos* is the Gaelic word), the otters carry their booty. They

are great enemies to sport in those streams where the salmon and trout are preserved, not so much from the amount of fish that they actually destroy,—though this is by no means inconsiderable, as an otter has been known to kill ten salmon in one day,—as from the fact that they scare the fish from their spawning place, and cause them to desert the stream. The otter, too, appears to slay fish from the mere love of sport, as he frequently leaves them on the shore almost untouched, or only devoured in their choicest parts. It is not surprising, therefore, that an active gamekeeper should regard this amphibious creature as a mortal foe.

During the winter of 1859–60, the Glencreggan keeper killed five otters in the short space between Beallachaghaochan Port, and Glenacardoch Point. I had no opportunity of witnessing the sport, but it was thus described to me by those who were annually accustomed to take part in it.

The rocks by the shore are searched for the otter's spraint. When this is found, it is easy to find the *den*, whither he has carried his fish, but by no means easy to drag him from his retreat. The otter is evidently aware that he has but a small chance for his life if he ventures forth; and he accordingly keeps as close as a badger, and is as difficult to be "drawn." Terriers, and not the weird-looking otter-hounds, are the dogs chiefly used for this purpose; and, where circumstances

permit, they are aided by the men dislodging the stones under which the otter is secreted. Sometimes the dogs and the otter grapple with each other underneath the stones, and roll out together. But, generally (and this is what is desired), the otter watches his opportunity, and makes a rush from his den over the narrow belt of shingle, and among the rocks into the sea. This is the exciting moment for the sportsman, who is lying in wait, gun in hand, and finger on trigger, watching for this *bolt*; and, as a matter of course, unless he is very dexterous and is a good shot, the otter preserves his life. Occasionally the sport is pursued at night by torchlight; dogs are not then needed. The shooter lies in wait until the otter leaves his den in quest of food.\*

Mr. Colquhoun, in his "Rocks and Rivers," devotes to the otter a chapter, in which he says, "In the West Highlands, especially, many of the resident proprietors pique themselves on the excellence of their otter-terriers. Some few keep hounds for the purpose, but the terrier is a very good substitute in these wild districts, and, of course, far more easily procured. . . . Terriers are best in rocky cavernous places, and seldom fail to make the otter bolt if they can get near him. From the abundance of prey, these sea-hunting otters

\* Otter hunting in the Hebrides is described and very well illustrated in the "Penny Magazine," vol. iii. pp. 496, 503.

grow to a great size. . . . Many a fine fish have I seen lying on the shingle, with only a few bites out of its neck, and it was seldom honoured by a second visit from its captor."

The fabulous *master-otter* — so invulnerable, and whose skin possesses such charms, that, where a portion of it is, the house cannot be burned, or the ship cast away, and nor steel nor bullet can harm the man who owns but one inch of it — is fully believed in by the Cantire people.\* It is thus mentioned by Daniel, in his "Rural Sports: — "In Scotland, the vulgar have an opinion that there is a king or leader among the otters, spotted with white and larger. They believe that it is never killed without the sudden death of a man or some animal at the same instant; that its skin is endowed with great virtue, as an antidote against infection, a preservative of the warrior from wounds, and insures the mariner from all disasters upon the sea." This legend may have arisen from the value of the otter's skin, which, despite its American rivals, becomes a valuable perquisite to its captor. I did not hear of its flesh being used as an article of food, though we know that, from its fishy nature, the Church of Rome allowed it to be eaten on *maigre* days.

Mr. Colquhoun says, that the *note* of an otter is

\* See a description of it in Maxwell's "Wild Sports of the West," p. 194.

“something between a squeal and a whistle;” it is “singularly plaintive,” and has “something of the modulated whistle of the buzzard or the kite, but far more sweet, soft, and musical, rising in a low cadence from the shore, and then melting into the clear air.” So that if when wandering “by the sad sea waves” on the Glencreggan shore, we hear this mysterious and “most musical, most melancholy” song, we need not ascribe it to any mermaid or siren, but simply to our friend, the otter, serenading his otteress.

Seals also come to the caves on this coast during their breeding season; and at other times may be seen swimming about very close to the shore. About five miles below Glenbarr, on the western coast of Cantire, is a favourite place for them. There are many rocks there out in the sea, which are the resort of seals, who may be seen upon them from the shore singly and in groups, basking in the sun. They are not easy to be shot; for their quickness of eye is so great, that at the first flash they plunge suddenly under water, and are out of reach before the ball can touch them. They are even more destructive than the otter in their onslaughts upon fish, and have this advantage over it, that they can seize fish with their paws, and also break nets with them. They give the best sport to the shooter when they swim about like dogs, with only their heads exposed above the water. The greatest dexterity is

then required to shoot them, so quick are they in their movements. The common method pursued in Scotland of hunting them in caves by torchlight, and killing them with blows from bludgeons, is well known.\*

Besides salmon and trout, the otter, no less than the seal, finds a plentiful variety of fare wherewith to tickle his palate. The sea-fish along this coast are red rock cod of the largest size, ling, tusk, skate, plaice, lythe or white pollock, haddock, whiting, mackerel, seath, coal fish, conger eel, soles, and turbot. The enumeration of this list insensibly reminds me of the anecdote of the Scotch minister, who was preaching about Jonah, and was eking out his scanty ideas by "vain repetitions." "And what, me brethren!" said he, "should ye suppose was the fish that swallowed Jonah! Maybe it was a haddock! Nae, my brethren, but it was not a haddock! Maybe it was a turbot! Nae, my brethren, but it was not a turbot! Maybe it was a saumon! Nae, me brethren, but it was not a saumon! Maybe it was a mackerel! Nae, me brethren, but it was not a mackerel! Maybe, it was a harrin! Nae, me brethren, but it was not a harrin!" Here, a member of the congregation, who either feared that his

\* Rocks and Rivers, p. 165. See Pennant's "Zoology" and "Scotland;" "Letters from Scotland;" the Rev. G. Low's "Fauna Orcadensis;" also "Penny Magazine," vol. iv. p. 101, where there is a picture of seal-hunting in Scotland.

minister was going through an interminable catalogue of fish, or else thought that he was in a dubious or ignorant condition, suddenly piped out, "Maybe it was a whal!!" "Maybe, ye're an auld fule!" responded the irascible preacher, "for tackin' the word o' God out o' the mouth o' his minister!"

Beside the fish already mentioned, herrings also pass by the coast during July and August, pursued by aquatic birds, whales, porpoises, and the all-devouring cod. Lobsters and crabs of the largest size are numerous, and are generally used as bait in cod-fishing. With the exception of a few large brown mussels adhering to sunken rocks, no bivalved shell-fish of any description is to be found along this part of the coast; but in West Loch Tarbert oysters of large size but good quality are plentiful. In shallow bays a few prawns and shrimps occur, and great shoals of sprats and herring fry.

From the Glencreggan coast up to the fishing-village of Muasdale, we shall find abundant evidence that this is a crab and lobster-shore; for lobster-pots and lobster-traps will be scattered upon the shingle, or piled in the cobbles. The "pots" are made of wicker-work; the "traps" of network, stretched over hoops; and the former bear a very close similarity to a lady's crinoline. Rows of these traps and pots, baited with fragments of fish, are lowered at night in likely places along the

rocks, and raised in the morning, when the negro scavengers of the sea are found to have made their way through the tapering holes in the net-work, and to have climbed up the pots “hand over hand,” and then gone down after their bait into the tunnel-like well, never to return. Lobsters form a chief portion of the income of the Muasdale fishermen, who catch them in large quantities, and send them off to Tarbert or Campbellton, from whence the steamers will convey them—



THE FASHIONABLE LOBSTER-POT.

who knows where? A shilling was the standard price for a lobster at Muasdale—size making no difference.

In a storm that happened while we were at Glencreggan, when

“The western wind was wild, and dank wi’ foam;”

one of the Muasdale fishing-boats was dashed upon the rocks, and so damaged that she could not be made seaworthy under six weeks’ labour—no small loss to the owners. They are accustomed to place their crabs and



lobsters in well-boxes (pierced with holes) and sunk in the sea, if it should not be convenient to send them to market immediately upon their capture; and occasionally these well-boxes are torn from their moorings by one of those fierce storms that will suddenly arise on this coast during the prevalence of the equinoctial gales,—

“When western winds the vast Atlantic urge  
To thunder on thy coast;”

and the poor lobsters and crabs are floated out to sea in their wooden prison, there to perish, unless a giant wave should happily dash the box against a rock, and release them by shivering their prison to pieces.

Not only are the westerly gales of great violence upon this coast, but the great gulf-stream from the Atlantic also sets in with much force, as though, by the gifts that it brought with it from tropical climes, it would seek to recompense the fishermen and others for the losses occasioned through the destructive western gales. Pennant tells us, that a part of the mast of the *Tilbury*, man-of-war, burnt at Jamaica, was taken up on the western coast of Scotland; and that plants, natives of Jamaica, are also found on the western shores of Islay, and other islands of the Hebrides. He supposes the seeds of the plants to fall into the water of the Jamaica rivers, and to be carried down the river to the sea; from thence, by tides and currents, and the predominance of the east wind, to be forced through the

Gulf of Florida, and into the North American ocean. When arrived in that part of the Atlantic, they fall in with the westerly winds, which generally blow two-thirds of the year in that tract; which may help to convey them to the shores of the Hebrides and Orkneys.\* Washed on shore, haply the seed may take root; and thus, this tropical plant is mysteriously conveyed across the globe, to come to maturity in a northern clime. Here is a subject for a poet in this voyage of the seed! Its birth in the Western isles of the Indies — its travels down the river, and across seas, and gulfs, and oceans, until it finds a resting-place on the Western Isles of Scotland. The migrations of Indus himself could scarcely have been more startling, than for a seed dropped in Jamaica to find itself growing into a plant in Islay or Jura.

Hugh Miller has an interesting passage on this point, which I cannot do better than quote at length.† “I had frequent occasions to remark that much of the wood used in buildings in the smaller and outer islands of the Hebrides must have drifted across the Atlantic, borne eastwards and northwards by the great gulf stream. Many of the beams and boards, sorely drilled by the *Teredo navalis*, are of American timber, that from time to time has been cast upon the shore,—a

\* Hebrides, p. 233.

† Cruise of the *Betsey*, p. 46.

portion of it, apparently, from timber-laden vessels unfortunate in their voyage; but a portion of it also, with root and branch still attached, bearing the mark of having been swept to the sea by transatlantic rivers. Nuts and seeds of tropical plants are occasionally picked up on the beach. My friend gave me a bean or nut of the *Dolichos urens*, or cow-itch shrub of the West Indies, which an islander had found on the shore sometime in the previous year, and given to one of the manse children as a toy; and I attach some little interest to it, as a curiosity of the same class with the large canes and the fragments of carved wood found floating near the shores of Madeira by the brother-in-law of Columbus, and which, among other similar pieces of circumstantial evidence, led the great navigator to infer the existence of a western continent. Curiosities of this kind seem still more common in the northern than in the western islands of Scotland."

"Large exotic nuts or seeds," says Dr. Patrick Neill, in his "Tour through Orkney and Shetland," "which in Orkney are known by the name of Molucca beans, are occasionally found among the *rejectamenta* of the sea, especially after westerly winds. There are two kinds commonly found; the larger (of which the fishermen very generally make snuff-boxes) seem to be seeds from the great pod of the *Mimosa scandens* of the West Indies; the smaller seeds, from the pod of the *Dolichos*

*urens*, also a native of the same region. It is probable that the currents of the ocean, and particularly that great current which is seen from the Gulf of Florida, and is hence denominated the Gulf-stream, aid very much in transporting across the mighty Atlantic these American products. They are generally quite fresh and entire, and afford an additional proof how impervious to moisture, and how imperishable nuts\* and seeds generally are."

Mr. Kingsley, in his prose Idyll of "North Devon," has the following passages on this subject of the Gulf-stream:—"In the very water which laps against our bows, troops of glossy-limbed negro girls may have hunted the purblind shark in West Indian harbours, beneath glaring white-walled towns, with their rows of green jalousies, and cocoa-nuts, and shaddock groves. For on those white sands there to our left, year by year, are washed up foreign canes, cassia beans, and tropic seeds; and sometimes too, the tropic ocean snails, with their fragile shells of amethystine blue, come floating in mysteriously in fleets from the far west out of the passing Gulf-stream, where they have been sailing out their little life, never touching shore or ground, but

\* At the drainage of Whittlesea Mere, in 1851, an ancient British boat was discovered. It was hollowed from the trunk of an oak, and was twenty-seven feet in length. Within it were several bushels of nuts.

buoyed each by his cluster of air-bubbles, pumped in at will under the skin of his tiny foot, by some cunning machinery of valves, — small creatures truly, but very wonderful to men who have learned to reverence not merely the size of things, but the wisdom of their idea, raising strange longings and dreams about that submarine ocean-world which stretches, teeming with richer life than this terrestrial one, away, away there westward, down the path of the sun toward the future centre of the world's destiny."

And again, where he meets with the fragment of a wreck: — "In what tropic tornado, or on what coral key of the Bahamas, months ago, to judge by those barnacles, did that tall ship go down? How long has this scrap of wreck gone wandering down the Gulf-stream, from Newfoundland to the Azores, from the Azores to Biscay, from Biscay hitherward on its homeless voyage past the Norwegian shore?"

And yet again: — "The Atlantic gales are sending in their *avant-couriers* of ground-swell\*; six hours more, and the storm which has been sweeping over 'the still-vexed Bermoothes,' and, bending the tall palms of West Indian Isles, will be roaring" over the moors of Glencreggan.

\* In speaking of Gaelic as a highly descriptive language, Mr. Campbell says: "The thundering sound of the waves beating on the shore is well expressed by *Tonn*, a wave; *Lunn*, a heavy Atlantic swell." — *West Highland Tales*, vol. i. p. 130.

Mr. Campbell, in the Introduction to his "West Highland Tales," makes repeated mention of the "fairy-eggs" and drift-logs that are carried by the Gulf-stream to the Scottish coast. I will quote one of many passages:—"That smoked rafter (in the Highland hut) certainly was once a seed in a fir-cone somewhere abroad. It grew to be a pine tree; it must have been white with snow in winter, and glittering with rain-drops and hoarfrost in bright sunshine at various times and seasons. The number of years it stood in the forest can be counted by the rings in the wood. It is certain that it was torn up by the roots, for the roots are there still. It has been to warm seas, and has worn a marine dress of green and brown since it lost its own natural dress of green branches. Birds must have sat on it in the forest, crabs and shells have lived on it at sea, and fish must have swam about it; and yet it is now a rafter, hung with black pendants of peat smoke. A tree that grew beside it may now be in Spitzbergen amongst walruses. Another may be a snag in the Mississippi amongst alligators, destined to become a fossil tree in a coal field. Part of another may be a Yankee rocking-chair, or it may be part of a ship in any part of the world, or the tram of a cart, or bit of a carriage, or a wheelbarrow, or a gate-post, or anything that can be made anywhere."

The westerly currents and gales make the harbourage

and anchorage along the Atlantic shore of Cantire very unsafe during the winter season and the vernal and autumnal equinoxes; for no part of the shore is indented by an arm of the sea until we come to West Loch Tarbert, in the northern portion of Cantire. Such vessels as venture upon the coast in the spring and summer seasons to land coals and ship potatoes for the English and Irish markets, are abruptly obliged to weigh anchor and sail for the opposite island of Gigha, where they lie in security until such time as the wind blows from a more favourable direction. But the sound between the mainland and the adjacent islands of Gigha and Cara abounds with sunken rocks and shelves, which sometimes prove fatal to vessels. When the cloud-caps are seen on the Paps of Jura, mariners have a sure prognostication that "varra coorse" or "saft" weather is to follow, and they take their measures accordingly.

Off this coast, too, may be occasionally observed that wonderful luminous appearance of the sea, occasioned by myriads of microscopic animals of the Medusa tribe. Macculloch has devoted an entire chapter to this subject, to which I would beg to refer the curious reader. "The whole water (he says) from Shetland to the Mull of Cantire was rendered a body of light by these minute creatures." And again he says:—"This spiral creature extended from the Mull of Cantire to Shetland, rendering

all the sea muddy for miles in breadth and fathoms in depth ; and so numerous, that a pint of water contained five thousand, or ten thousand, — it is the same thing. The computation must be left to Zedekiah Buxton ; but if all the men, women, and children that have been born since the creation were shaved, and all their separate hairs were lives, these would not amount to one generation of this spiral people born on Monday morning to die on Wednesday night, and so on for ever and ever. Oceans in breadth and miles in depth, all active, all bustling and busy ; every atom of water a life ; a universe of self-will, and desire, and gratification, and disappointment ; and the occupation of the whole being to destroy and be destroyed, to eat and be eaten. Thus it has been from the creation, and thus it will be ; — truly, we feel woefully insignificant in the middle of this crowd. I really cannot think, with Cato, that the world was made for Cæsar. If the majority is to have it, the ocean is something more than the highway of nations ; and we of the earth and the air, — men, mites, midges, and all, — would scarcely be missed, though the tail of a comet should once more sweep the ocean to the top of Ararat and Cotopaxi.”\*

\* Highlands and Western Isles, vol. iv. chap. i. See also Kingsley's "Miscellanies," vol. ii. p. 305 ; and Macculloch's "Western Islands," vol. ii. pp. 189—202.



Macculloch, on this subject, has quoted the lines from Cowley: —

“The fish around her crowded, as they do  
To the false light that treacherous fishers show :”

and a recent writer \* brings forward the evidence of Captain Scoresby, Darwin, Gosse, and Professor Forbes on the phosphorescent light of the marine animalcule. Scott thus speaks of the luminous appearance : —

“Awaked before the rushing prow  
The mimic ocean-fires glow,  
Those lightnings of the wave ;  
Wild sparkles crest the breaking tides,  
And flashing round the vessel’s sides  
With elfish lustre lave.  
While far behind their livid light  
To the dark billows of the night  
A gloomy splendour gave.”

And Coleridge thus : —

“Beyond the shadow of the ship  
I watched the water-snakes ;  
They moved in tracks of shining light,  
And, when they reared, the elfish white  
Fell off in hoary flakes.  
Within the shadow of the ship,  
I watched their rich attire ;

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\* “On the Luminous Appearance of the Sea, caused by *Noctiluca Miliaris*,” by J. W. Lawrance, Esq., of Peterborough, 1859.

Blue, glossy green, and velvet black,  
They coiled, and swam, and every track  
Was flash of golden fire."

Such were some of the common objects on and off the  
sea-shore at Glencreggan.