

CHAPTER X.

LAST VISIT TO THE MOOR.

JOHN MACKENZIE A BOTANIST—A CAUTIOUS STALK BUT NO SHOT—A LONG TRUDGE—THAT 'PEAT IN THE ATLANTIC'—THE LEWSMEN—ONLY VESTIGES OF A FINE RACE—CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PEOPLE GENERALLY—THE CROFTER QUESTION.

THE last chapter was a mere interpolation which, though not warranted by the title of this book, I was led to make when on the subject of fishing, and I hope may have proved to be of sufficient interest to warrant my departure from the strict text.

I will conclude the first part by returning to the Lews, and to our last experience of life and sport and moorland rambles in that 'land of the mountain and the flood,' and, I may add, of peat and loch, two prevailing characteristics of its superficial formation.

Old John Mackenzie was quite a small botanist in his way. He alone knew the Gaelic names of

many moorland flowers and plants, and imparted his information, with many chuckles of satisfaction and approval, as my wife repeated the names at his dictation. In return we tried to teach him to pronounce English words, which he essayed with considerable success. But we stumped him altogether with 'eccremocarpus.' After many ineffectual attempts, he gave it up, saying, 'Ma tongue iss too stobborn.' Whereupon we declared that he had a great deal more English than he admitted, or he could not have so expressed himself.

On the last occasion of my visiting the Caldershalls in search of deer, I was accompanied by my wife. She often stalked with me when not very far away, and enjoyed the excitement of the stalk itself, but could never be prevailed on to see the shot, or rather its effects.

This happened to be a lovely day, and so she came hoping to see some deer at any rate. We moved into the moor by the route I have before described, and were crossing a little piece of open ground intending to creep round under the hillocks of the connecting ridge so often mentioned, when Ian, my leader, excitedly, but in a low voice exclaimed, 'Down, lads, down for your lives.' All

sank down where they stood, like Roderick Dhu's followers, my wife included, leaving me in my chair upright but not conspicuous, as I had a large grey green cape wrapped round me. As many as could crawled behind me, making themselves as small as they conveniently could.

The object which had attracted Ian's attention, and caused his exclamation, was the horns of a stag which he saw moving along just above a brae behind which their owner was sheltered. Presently he came full in view, but did not perceive us, and trotted up another brae. He was shortly joined by some hinds, and all commenced to feed. We had remained perfectly motionless, and escaped detection.

John, however, wishing to get his glass to bear on them, wriggled himself into the partial shelter of a hillock and was followed by my wife. Thus we all remained for a considerable time, and the deer sank down to rest. Very careful, indeed, had the 'leddy' to be, and not budge an inch. At any movement John's hand was held up in a warning manner, or laid on her arm. The hinds were uneasy, however, and after a while got up, and quietly moved off over the ridge, and went out of

sight, taking the stag with them. This was, of course, our opportunity, and we were quickly on the move and got into more sheltered ground. Thence John and Donald proceeded to ascertain what had become of the deer.

They soon returned, and, as my wife expressed a wish to go and have a look at them, went to do so, before I proceeded on my way. We all soon reassembled, however, and then commenced the important business of the stalk. It was very amusing to watch John, and his efforts to assist the 'leddy' over difficult places. Full of the suppressed excitement of being in the vicinity of the game and conducting the stalk, and at the same time anxious to be careful of the 'leddy' and get her along with us, he sometimes was more vigorous in his attempts to help than he imagined. On one occasion he seized her, and by main force seemed to chuck her over a stream. Then he would seize her by the arm, and hurry her along. But it was done with the best intentions at being gentle.

Yet it was all to no purpose, so far as my getting a shot was concerned. We came on some hinds and calves separate from the herd, for the stag

and his companions had joined a number of others ; but their moving off alarmed the objects of our stalk, which were collected a little further round the hill, and all went off.

We had a long trudge afterwards, and not far from the top of Caldershall Beg I fired at and missed a stag which suddenly appeared showing only its head and neck. On this occasion John actually lifted my wife off the ground and held her up, so that she should get a sight of the beast.

Altogether we were unsuccessful, and eventually descended to the road, after going right round Caldershall Beg. But we were repaid for our exertions by a very glorious view we had under conditions of atmosphere which were dazzling in gorgeous colouring. The brilliant but broken light of a sun setting amongst great uneven masses of purple cloud, tinged with every variety of tint of pink and red and orange, illuminated portions of hill and brae and loch. One felt imbued with a bewitching sense of exquisite stormy beauty, and impressed by the mystery of what lies unrevealed in the deep darkening shadows of hill and cloud. That was our last tramp over the rugged and

more elevated moor, and it was one a sense of whose beauty remains with us still.

In this little sketch of autumn out-door life and sport in the Lews, that 'peat in the Atlantic,' as it has been described, I have restricted myself to representing it in its sporting and picturesque aspects only, and refrained from entering on the deeper subject of the social condition, habits, and customs of the people. This does not indeed enter into the scope of a book of this kind. With respect to such places as the standing stones of Callarnish, and other 'cromlechs' and places of interest, I must refer to the guide-books. My object has been to keep clear of the ordinary tourist-trodden ways.

Neither do I propose entering at length into the vexed crofter question, did I feel capable of doing so. But yet I cannot dismiss it without one word, for indeed it was to this very Loch Roag that a gunboat was ordered the year before last, to check some disposition to lawlessness which had been displayed by the people of Voltas close to that 'Reef' I have described.

A little 'bothie,' at the head of Drovenish Bay, then being built by my successor at Scaliscro, was

also destroyed one night while in course of erection. It seemed to be an aimless piece of mischief from which no advantage could be derived by anybody. I have heard, too, that the dyke which fenced off the cleared part of Scaliscro has been systematically destroyed and sheep driven over.

I am not aware that the men of Bernera, who hold the grazing on the other side, or others there, could establish any right to this, for it must have belonged to the now deserted village of Strome. It is the inhabitants of that village, wherever they may now be, who have suffered, and not Bernera, an island wholly disconnected with it; and no doubt, were the village resettled, its inhabitants would themselves have resisted any such attempt on the part of the Bernera men to dispossess them. This case only points the moral.

I am well aware that many good and honest men have taken up this question in the purest spirit of philanthropy, and an earnest desire to see justice done to a most deserving class of men. The aim of those who honestly desire to redress real grievances must command the respectful consideration of dispassionate observers, even though

they may differ with them both as to amount of injury and means of redress. Personally, I have a great feeling of interest in, and sympathy for, this simple, brave, and struggling people, and it is surely for the common weal of the empire that so fine, manly, and generally law-abiding a race should be firmly attached to the soil they love so well, in as large numbers as is compatible with justice to others and the soil's capacity to bear them. Human beings, and especially human beings of such a type as these Hebridean men, are of more consideration than grouse and deer, or even sheep.

The thoughtful man can hardly fail to feel this, as he stands on the site of some deserted village, with its ruined hovels and untilled crofts. Especially is this brought home to him when wandering among the green and beautiful, but now depopulated glens of Skye. All the vestiges that remain of a hardy and vigorous race, now scattered over the face of the earth, are to be found in the green strips of land and desolate stone heaps which now represent what once were cottages full of life and animation. But it is sheep which have dispossessed them, not grouse and deer, which have

comparatively done little to decrease the population of the islands. Indeed, the emigration must have taken place before Scotch shootings became so valuable.

However, the wrong that has been done is of the past. Who could now recall these lost tribes to their ancient holdings? These little village communities, as such, are extinct, and, too frequently, it is those who have never held rights there which set up a claim and are encouraged by ignorant agitators. I am not now referring to what may be done to improve the condition and secure the rights of existing crofters, now in occupation of their holdings. Doubtless something may well be effected in this direction; but I cannot see that they actually possess any sort of abstract right to inherit the ground from which *others* have been ousted. It seems to me this is a matter more of friendly good-will and feeling on the part of the proprietors than of actual justice. Where rights, or supposed rights, have been abstracted from existing occupants is of course another matter into which I cannot here enter.

But I fear that, whether with any rightful claim or without it, a spirit of appropriation is being

fostered which is leading to the demoralisation of the people, and a moral obliquity which may develop into illegality and wrong, and lead to their own ruin. The action of the fanatical or one-sided zealots, or, worse still, that of the unscrupulous professional agitator, ever keen to rouse clashing interests, or stir up ill feeling between class and class, may lead to the resuscitation of that lawless spirit which once pervaded the people, and which it has taken generations to change into the honest, God-fearing, law-abiding impulses by which they have now so long been distinguished. These agitators, trading on the simplicity of the people, would have them demand, '*per fas aut nefas*,' what was never theirs, or, if part theirs, urge them to seize the whole. It is not such a course as this that will bring clashing interests into unison, or rectify past wrong.

But I must no longer trespass on the reader's patience, or attempt to dilate on a subject which ought to be considered pretty well thrashed out by those interested on one side or the other, and more competent to discuss it than I am. Only it pains me to see these poor people led astray.

I will conclude by remarking that crime in the

Lews is remarkably distinguished by its absence. Formerly notorious for evil living of all descriptions, the Lews people are now a moral, honest race of men, retaining, in common with all Highlanders, a moderate affection for a glass of whisky, and not averse to dancing and otherwise enjoying themselves, but still a douce, sober people, if not led astray by interested and unscrupulous persons. I believe it is to the influence of the clergy, both of the Established and the Free Kirks, that this great change is mainly attributable. All honour to those worthy men who have effected such a transformation.

As a case in point, where the exception certainly proves the rule, I will once more quote from a letter of John's in 1884.

'I believe, sir, you have seen in the papers about the heifer was stolen from Maclean Gisla opposite here by two young lads. It is not in any account of any kept in the Lews, been traced out so well. I was one of the party that was on the track. We followed the track for nine miles till we came upon where they slaughter the poor beast, and from thence they were traced to their homes. There is eighty years since such a theft

was committed in the Lews, and I hope it will be the last one.'

Cordially do I echo John's hope, and, in addition, that the lawless spirit which once existed may not be resuscitated. With this, I raise my bonnet and bid adieu to my friends among this worthy people.

P.S.—*Jan.*, 1888.—The foregoing was written before the late raid on the Park forest, and the acts of lawlessness which have succeeded that initiatory attempt. Possibly, before this appears in print, what I have said may be still more emphasised. Very grieved have I been to see the effect produced on the minds of this simple and credulous people by an unscrupulous and alien agitation; for I believe that more subtle and designing influences lie masked behind the outward expression of the people and their spokesmen. Would that these instigators to lawlessness could be punished in place of their dupes!

The crops were unusually good last season, but the failure of the herring harvest on the east coast of Scotland, on which so many depend, must have sent home many a poor fellow without the

sum of money on which he relied for his year's expenses, and indeed out of pocket in respect of that expended in the search for employment. Much destitution, I fear, must exist, but even this cannot justify the resort to such extreme measures or to lawless appropriation. No recent action has deprived anyone of land ; I believe evictions for sheep farms or shootings have not taken place during the proprietorship of the late Sir James or Lady Matheson, and, had not the former brought all his resources to the help of the famishing islanders in the terrible famine year of 1846—7, what would have become of them? All this seems to be forgotten, as well as the many efforts made to improve their condition, and the deep interest Lady Matheson has always displayed in their welfare, and the sacrifices she has made for them.

The effect of the Park raid was ludicrously exaggerated. Some announced the death of hundreds of deer, and that boat-loads were shipped to Harris. There is reason to believe that but very few, comparatively, were killed. Unpractised shots may blaze away a deal of ammunition with but little to show for it. Still the

purpose was the same, however limited the real injury done, or small the result achieved.

Most earnestly do I hope that means may be found to reconcile existing differences, and generally improve the condition of the people ; whether by state assistance for harbours and fisheries, by emigration, or other measures, without injustice to established rights.

From an Imperial point of view, any unnecessary expatriation of the islanders of the western coast would be, as it has been, a national loss. These islands, Skye especially, once formed a depôt from which was drawn some of the finest fighting material in the British Army. At present, in the Lews, there is a considerable number of Navy Reserve men. But, however desirable it may be to retain such valuable material for the use of the public services, the land cannot support it. Even were landlords willing to surrender their rights at the dictation of those who have no sort of sympathy with them, the congestion must be relieved ere long, and the difficulty to be faced only postponed.