

CHAP. XV.

SHADE AND SHINE.

Geology of the Coast. — Old Scotland. — Mont Blanc an Upstart. — Procopius and his wonderful Descriptions. — How to write contemporary History. — Barr School. — The Scholars and their System. — *Rouge et Noir*. — A Cantire Winter. — The Climate. — “Coorse” Weather. — Storms and Mist. — Tempests. — Sunrise *versus* Sunset. — Much to be said on both Sides. — The Sunset on the Atlantic. — The Painter and the Poet both at fault.

HUGH MILLER, in sailing from Islay northwards, made the following general observations on the coast on which Glencreggan is situated, which will explain its geological character and formation.

“The disposition of land and water on this coast suggests the idea that the Western Highlands, from the line in the interior whence the rivers descend to the Atlantic, with the islands beyond to the outer Hebrides, are all parts of one great mountainous plain, inclined slantways into the sea. First, the long-withdrawing valleys of the mainland, with their brown mossy streams, change their character as they dip beneath the sea-level,

and become salt-water lochs. The lines of hills that rise over them jut out as promontories, till cut off by some transverse valley, lowered still more deeply into the brine, and that exists as a kyle, minch, or sound, swept twice every tide by powerful currents. The sea deepens as the plain slopes downward; mountain-chains stand up out of the water as larger islands, single mountains as smaller ones, lower eminences as mere groups of pointed rocks; till at length, as we pass outwards, all trace of the submerged land disappears, and the wide ocean stretches out and away its unfathomable depths. The model of some Alpine country raised in plaster on a flat board, and tilted slantways at a low angle into a basin of water, would exhibit on a minute scale an appearance exactly similar to that presented by the western coast of Scotland and the Hebrides. The water would rise along the hollows, longitudinal and transverse, forming sounds and lochs, and surround, island-like, the more deeply-submerged eminences.”

And he sums up its geology thus:—“The idea imparted of *old* Scotland to the geologist here — of Scotland proudly, aristocratically, supereminently old — for it can call Mont Blanc a mere upstart, and Dhawalagheri, with its 28,000 feet of elevation, a heady fellow of yesterday,— is not that of a land settling down by the head like a foundering vessel, but of a land whose

hills and islands, like its great aristocratic families, have arisen from the level in very various ages, and under the operation of circumstances essentially diverse."*

As I have quoted this for the reader's instruction, I may here quote for his amusement that fictitious description of the Scottish Highlands written by Procopius, a legal gentleman at Constantinople, who died just 1300 years ago, after being high in favour with Anastasius and Justinian, and Secretary-of-War to Belisarius. He set up to be the Macaulay of his age, and to judge from the following specimen of his writings (as translated by Gibbon) must have been the founder of the Society for the Confusion of Useless Knowledge. "Great Britain," he says, "is divided into eastern and western parts, by an antique wall, the boundary of life and death. The east is a fair country, inhabited by civilised people; the air is healthy, the water is pure and plentiful, and the earth yields her regular and fruitful increase. In the west, beyond the wall, the air is infectious and mortal; the ground is covered with serpents; and this dreary solitude is the region of departed spirits, who are transported from the opposite shores in substantial boats, and by living rowers. Some families of fishermen, the subjects of the Franks, are excused from tribute, in consideration of the mysterious

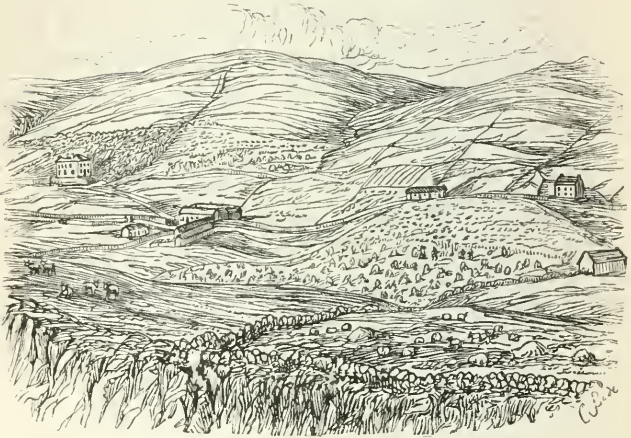
* Cruise of the *Betsey*, pp. 3, 4. For the geology of Cantire, see Appendix.

office which is performed by these Charons of the ocean. Each, in his turn, is summoned at the hour of midnight, to hear the voices, and even the names of the ghosts; he is sensible of their weight, and he feels himself impelled by an unknown but irresistible power." In this way was contemporary history written thirteen centuries ago. But such reports as these afforded the civilised and luxurious southern nations an excuse for not interfering with the savage wilds of a northern clime. "How," asks the historian, "could the masters of the fairest and most wealthy climates of the globe refrain from turning with contempt from gloomy hills assailed by the winter tempest, from lakes covered with a blue mist, and from cold and lonely heaths, over which the deer of the forest were chased by a troop of naked barbarians?" So much for ancient history; now let us turn to modern times and personal experiences.

On the upper side of the high road, about half-way between Glencreggan and Barr Village, is the parochial school; it has been built within these few years, and is a commodious building.* The ground-floor is occupied

* It is a subject equally delicate and unsavoury even to hint at in the semi-obscurity of a foot-note; but, when I say that there is not a single outbuilding of any description attached to the school premises, for the use either of the inmates or the scholars (and, *à fortiori*, the cottages are without such accommodations), I am mentioning a fact which makes itself known to the tourist in the Highlands in various

by the school-room, approached from the back, and lighted by three western windows. The upper part of



FROM GLENCREGGAN HOUSE TO BARR SCHOOL.

the house is apportioned to the master and mistress, and is approached by an exterior flight of steps. The disagreeable ways, and which is an evidence of a *trait* of national character that is most repulsive and disgusting, both to the moral and physical senses. Coleridge's enumeration of the seventy-two stenches in the town of Cologne could easily be paralleled in Scotland; although the forcible reasons no longer exist, which not more than a century ago obliged the visitor to an Edinburgh or Glasgow wynd or close, after ten o'clock at night, to be preceded by a guide shouting, "Haud yer hand!" to those who were emptying unclean vessels from the windows into the street, and were permitted to commit this filthy act by civic permission, and by sound of city drum. For which any one who is curious on such a revolting subject may find a verification in "Letters

present master is Mr. William Conner, who was trained in the Normal Seminary. His wife is the school-mistress, and they appeared very efficient, and well adapted for their situation. The school is supported by the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge, with a salary to the master of 17*l.* a year, a residence, and two and a half acres of "mortified" land. It has no help from the Government, but the Committee of General Assembly endow a school in this same united parish of Killean and Kilchenzie, in which Barr School is placed. During the last quarter of a century the people have manifested a laudable desire to give their children an education; and the advantages resulting from this wise step have produced a sensible change on the morals of the community. The girls are taught to mend and make clothes, a novelty of the present day that is of no slight significance in a Highland village. The school was tolerably well supplied with maps and books and the usual paraphernalia, and the proficiency of many of the pupils was very satisfactory. For their schooling they paid various sums, ranging from two

from Scotland" (*e. g.* Letter II.), and Pennant's "Scotland," vol. i. p. 63. I was informed, on good authority, that there is almost a total absence of necessary outbuildings throughout the whole of the cottage accommodation in Cantire, and (I believe) in the islands and the other portions of the Western Highlands. The Highland tourist who wishes to botanise on a dyke side, is therefore strongly recommended to choose his dyke at a considerable distance from a human habitation. *Experientia docet.*

shillings per quarter, according to the means of their parents; and although, at the period of my visit, it was the harvest season, it did not appear to sensibly affect the school attendance, as is the case in agricultural parishes in England. The children were about seventy in number, from mere "infants," up to those who had reached their fifteenth year; and boys and girls occupied the same room. With a very few exceptions of those of the better sort, all the children were bare-footed and bare-legged, to an English eye a peculiar feature in a parish school. Personal cleanliness was insisted on, and the children, for the most part, looked clean and tidy. The school presented an illustration of *Rouge et Noir*; for, among the scholars was a private pupil of the master's, a respectably-born black boy, who a fortnight before had arrived from the West Indies, and whose tawny countenance and woolly head looked very remarkable among the red-haired and fair-visaged Highlanders. He had now to look forward to the rigours of a Scotch winter, one, as it happened, which was unusually severe and protracted. Indeed, many of the Cantire people say that the winter of 1859 could not be paralleled since that of 1816. Many cattle and sheep in the neighbourhood of Glencreggan and Glenbarr died from the severity of the weather and the scarcity of fodder; and, according to the reports of the Registrar-General, the number of

deaths of all classes of the community was unusually great.

Generally speaking, however, the winter in the neighbourhood of Glencreggan, and along the western coast of Cantire, is mild; more especially in comparison with many other districts in Scotland. Snow rarely lies upon the ground many days together, and frosts are not of long continuance. The climate of Cantire is mild, and rather humid; and though productive of asthma and rheumatic affections during the spring and latter part of the autumn, from the sudden changes in the weather, yet instances of longevity are not uncommon. The latest case was that of a woman, who died not far from Glencreggan, early in April last (1860), aged one hundred years, having retained full possession of her faculties up to the last. On the whole, the climate is considered a particularly healthy one *, and has been found so by those English visitors who have now, for several years, made this neighbourhood their summer home.

The great feature in the climate is the rain. At certain portions of the year the general aspect of the weather is what the natives term "coorse;" and the epigram said to have been written by Aaron Hill upon

* "When we consider the variableness of our temperature," says the Rev. J. MacArthur, speaking of this western coast of Cantire, "it may be surprising that the climate should be so healthy as it in general is." — *Statistical Account*.

the pane of an inn window at Berwick-upon-Tweed, is very applicable to the western coast of Cantire:—

“Scotland! thy weather’s like a modish wife,
Thy winds and rains for ever are at strife;
The termagant, awhile, her bluster tries,
And when she can no longer scold — she cries.”

“It rains whiles,” and when it does not rain “it blaws,” at any rate, during a great portion of the year. From the want of shelter, the west coast of Cantire is very subject to stormy weather and sudden changes of climate. A mild day, especially at the equinoctial seasons, is frequently succeeded by furious and tremendous tempests of north or north-west winds. The high range of hills in Cantire attract the storm-clouds, conducting them over the low lying islands of Gigha and Cara, and the strait, which is but three and a half miles in breadth; so that the fall of rain is very much less in these islands than in Cantire, or mountainous Jura. The cloud-capped Paps of Jura afford to the inhabitants of Cantire a sure prognostic of rain, or, if the clouds are of a whitish appearance, of a heavy gale of wind; and, when the wind sets in from the west, the exhalations of the Atlantic are attracted to the Highlands of Cantire. These floating vapours are constantly carried about by the prevailing winds, and impregnate the atmosphere. To these are added the humid exhalations which arise from the lochs and marshes in the interior; and although these are counteracted to a great extent

by the dry east winds, yet the atmosphere is naturally moist.

Our visit to Glencreggan was made during the latter part of August and the beginning of September (1859), the most favourable part of the year for fine weather; and we were fortunate in having many consecutive days of glorious sunshine, when an out-of-door life was full of exquisite delight. But the shine was varied by shade; and we had our share of Scotch mists as well as our days of driving rain. On the two or three days that succeeded our arrival at Glencreggan, although it was tolerably fine and clear for a distance of several miles, yet there was not the slightest trace of Islay and Jura, which were obscured by local mists; and our friend's description of the view that we *ought* to have seen from Glencreggan was somewhat on a par with that of the London gentleman who showed his French visitor the view of the great metropolis from Waterloo Bridge, during a November fog. On such mornings, when—

“The blinding mist came down and hid the land—”

when Jura and Islay had entirely disappeared from our view, and when Gigha and Cara would seem to have floated many miles out to sea, then, as the vapours would begin to disperse, the Paps of Jura would lift themselves out of the mysterious ocean of mist, and, presently, through the ragged rents of drift, portions of

Islay would sail into sight; till, at length, sky and sea would seem to suck up the vapours, and the sun would clearly reveal the long line of island, that, perchance, had been hidden from us for two or three days.

Grand, too, was it to watch from Glencreggan a storm sweeping across the Atlantic from Jura, blotting out the lofty Paps, suddenly building a wall of rain between us and Islay, lashing the sea into fury, hurrying the brown-sailed fishing-boats over galloping billows, driving the screaming gulls before its face, and then, with a mighty roar of wind, dashing itself against the opposing cliffs, sweeping over our house-top with a mad swishing shriek, until it swirled away over the hills and heather, and sobbed out its rage on the heart of distant mountains.

Very grand were these sudden storms, especially when accompanied by the lightning and thunder, the peals buffeting about among the hills, and dying in sullen echoes. Professor Wilson has, in more than one place, both powerfully and faithfully described these Highland mists and tempests. He speaks of the mist overtaking him on the moor, and holding him prisoner for many hours within its shifting walls, frail indeed, and opposing no resistance to the hand, yet impenetrable to the feet of fear as the stone dungeon's thralldom. "If the mist had remained, that would have been nothing; only a still, cold, wet seat on a stone; but, as "a trot becomes a gallop soon, in spite of curb and rein," so a Scotch

mist becomes a shower, and a shower a flood, and a flood a storm, and a storm a tempest, and a tempest thunder and lightning, and thunder and lightning heavenquake and earthquake.” * And, in the following fine passage, he describes an abundance of rain after a season of great drought:—“The windows of heaven were opened, and like giants refreshed with mountain-dew, the rivers flung themselves over the hills with roars of thunder. Like people that have hidden themselves in caves when their native land was oppressed, out gush the torrents, and descend with songs to the plain. The hill country is itself again when it hears the voice of streams. Magnificent army of mists! whose array encompasses islands of the sea, and who still, as thy glorious vanguard keeps deploying among the glens, rollest on in silence more sublime than the trampling of the feet of horses, or the sound of the wheels of chariots to the heath-covered mountains of Scotland, we bid thee hail.” †

The words of Mercury are harsh after the songs of Apollo; and quotations like the foregoing are as plums in a workhouse pudding, seriously endangering the author's narrative by their strong poetic contrast to his simple prose, which, in too many cases, may be continued into prosiness. Let my reader, then, credit me with much benevolence of heart, when I endeavour

* Recreations of Christopher North, vol. i. p. 83.

† *Idem*, vol. ii. p. 39.

to make him a sharer in the pleasure that these, and the like, quoted passages have already afforded me ; at the same time, let him ascribe to me great reticence in forbearing to extract many other choice fragments which are equally ready to hand, and which would greatly adorn and swell out this present narrative. I wish only to insert such quotations as shall help the reader to a better understanding of the subject under treatment, and bring it before him in a more lively manner.

I have already spoken of the view from Glencreggan, under the varied effects of storm, and mist, and sunshine : but it remains for me to say a few words on its grandly beautiful aspect at sunset, although the beauty was all too short and evanescent. It has been a subject of close debate, whether to see the sun rising from the sea, or the sun setting into the sea, is the more entrancing sight. The early risers have the best of the debate, in that they can watch both effects, and are therefore better able to form a decision than are those who can only judge of the aspect of sunrise from an enforced acquaintance with it some few times in their lives, when they have had to rise betimes to catch an early train, and are, perhaps, not half awake, and not at all in a placid state of mind. Then, too, so much depends upon position. Scarborough would probably decide for the sunrise ; Aberystwith for the sunset ; while Llandudno would remain neutral. As Sir Roger

de Coverley sagely observed, "There is much to be said on both sides;" but, all things considered, the majority of votes would probably be given for the setting sun, with its adjunct of the "soft hour that wakes the wish and melts the heart." At Glencreggan we should certainly have voted with the majority. We were, as I have said, on high ground over the sea, directly facing "the sumptuous west," the Hebridean group being to the right of the wide-stretching view, the coast of Ireland to the left, and, immediately in front of us, the expanse of ocean, with nothing but the Atlantic billows between us and America. It was at this open point of view, midway between the Irish coast and the Mull of Islay, that, during the time of our visit, the setting sun dipped into the waves.

I cannot remember seeing more beautiful sea-sunsets, even at Aberystwith. But at Glencreggan the islands added greatly to the loveliness of the scene; the long stretch of Islay and Jura, with their purple peaks standing out so sharply against the broad bars of molten gold, and the nearer islets floating in a sea whose hue changed from bright emerald to deepest violet with countless sparkles at every throb. There was one sunset in particular, that "burnt into my brain," and which I vainly essayed to represent with paint and brush; with very poor success, as I need not say. For even a Turner and a Danby can only indicate the fleeting glories of the

pageantry of heaven; and the most consummate art must necessarily come short of success in the futile endeavour to depict what it is impossible adequately to represent. A summer's sunset on the Atlantic is a scene which may not be delineated by pen or pencil so as to convey a full sense of the glorious and unapproachable original. Both painter and poet are at fault here. Danby has painted it; and Ayrshire's second poet, Alexander Smith, has expended upon it a wealth of expression and a world of imagery; and after all that has been so well said and painted, how much preferable is a five minutes' view of such a fleeting reality, than the enduring records of it on canvas or in verse.

Truly those were gratifying moments when we looked from Glencreggan over the wide Atlantic, and

“ Watched

The sunset build a city, frail as dreams,
With bridges, streets of splendour, towers; and saw
The fabrics crumble into rosy ruins,
And then grow grey as heath.”