

## CHAPTER VIII.

For it was annoyed greatly with robbers and outlaws, which troubled the whole state of the realm, every corner having a Robin Hood in it, that kept the woods, that spoiled all passengers and inhabitants.

SPENCER.

WE now return to Amherst, who, during the night, pregnant with so many busy adventures to his friends, had slept so profoundly on his bed of ferns, that he stirred not until the sun looked over the woods of the eastern hill, and glittered with broken rays through the foliage covering the mouth of the grotto. He started up, and found that the other sleepers, with the exception of O'Gollochar, were already on foot. Lochandhu was walking about under the trees with Macrory, occupied in the examination of the herd of cattle, whilst the rest of the party were busied in preparing a breakfast, from ingredients resembling those of the supper of the preceding evening.

“ We must be expeditious to-day, Mr Oakenwold,” said Lochandhu, after the first salutations of the morning ; “ we have a long tedious ride of it before us.”

“ I hope our poor horses have had something substantial then,” said Amherst.

“ I’ll warrant they have not been starved,” said Lochandhu ; “ but let us step this way, and we shall see how they are doing.”

A few paces brought them to a projecting shelf of the rock, within the enclosure, where their horses, and six or seven ponies of humbler stature, rough as goats, and with long shaggy tails and manes, were tied to strong pegs driven firmly into the ground. As Lochandhu had hinted, there was no fear of their starving, for they were littered up to their noses in sheaves of corn, two-thirds of which had been destroyed by their feet in eating the other. O’Gollochar, who now appeared, proceeded to give them such grooming as the place afforded, whilst the gentlemen hastened to breakfast, which, like the supper, was begun and terminated by the potation of a queach full of brandy.

“ You will be travelling soon, Macrory ?” said

Lochandhu, as he and Amherst were taking leave of him.

“ Och aye,” replied he ; “ I’ll be aff just after yoursell. But we’s e tak it at laishur—we needna hurry the puir beasts noo—we’re a’ safe enough. If I’m at hame by the morn’s mornin’, it’s the maist ye can expect o’ me.”

The horses being now saddled, they were led after the gentlemen up a steep path, from the stable, to the level ground on the top of the cliff, where they found themselves among the tall pines, on the very point of it. Though they now stood immediately over the grotto, not a vestige of any thing appeared that could indicate any such concealment below ; nor would Amherst have believed, had he not known the fact, that there were so many armed men, and so large a herd of horned cattle so near him. The smoke rising from the fire, broken by its ascent through the foliage, presented more the appearance of one of those morning mists, so often seen hanging over woods, in low situations, than any thing originating from an artificial cause. Even the lowing of the cattle underwent so many reverberations, that it was difficult to fix on the place whence it originated.

The spot where they stood was very commanding, and nothing in nature could be more enchanting than the surrounding scenery; the morning sun was now hailing it with a smiling face, as if he rejoiced to revisit it; his beams lighted up the woods hanging on the surrounding heights with the richest hues. The horsemen staid not long to admire, but rode away at a smart trot, Hamish preceding them as before.

Amherst availed himself of the first opportunity to question Lochandhu about the persons and place they had just left.

“Macrory is a sort of a cattle-dealer,” replied he, “a great attender of markets; and besides, as you might have gathered from his conversation, as well as from the liquor he entertained us with, he merchandizes a little in the smuggling way. He and his men have no objections to take a deer when he comes across them, or even to go in search of him when he does not choose to be so mannerly. As for the place, it is an old halting corner of his, where he often stops. I had some reason to guess he would be there last night, and thought it better to beat up his quarters,

than that we should travel all night to reach the public-house we are now going to."

There was something not quite satisfactory, and a good deal rather at variance with appearances, in this explanation, but Amherst was forced to content himself with it such as it was.

Their course lay for many miles up the banks of the larger river, sometimes running close to its margin through little dells of rich pasture, and at others along steep wooded precipices, or under the base of overhanging crags, or along their brow, where the smallest slip of a foot might have been fatal to both horse and rider. The grandeur, the beauty, and the endless diversity of the scenery of this wild stream, so bewitched Amherst's romantic imagination, that he almost forgot for a time the theme of his sorrows.

In this, however, he had soon sufficient leisure to indulge. For, winding away from the river, they climbed through woods of oak and birch, up the banks of a small tributary stream, in its rocks, its waterfalls, and its rapids, appearing like a miniature picture of the larger. As they continued to ascend, the birches grew thinner, until at last they entirely disappeared; and Amherst, in look-

ing before him, found that their horses' heads were directed up the gentle but rugged ascent of an apparently endless stretch of moorland, with hills rising here and there in lumpish and unshapely masses. Here, then, his thoughts were left undisturbed by external objects, save when occasionally interrupted by the sudden rising of a moorcock, as he started away with his covey behind him from among their horses' feet, and wheeled his flight to some knoll, where alighting, and carrying his red comb erect, he repeated his sonorous bell of defiance,—or by the conversation of his companion, which, however, chiefly passed unheeded by him, except when politeness made him give a reply, not always exactly to the purpose.

A lake of several miles in extent, bounded by high barren hills, sweeping down to its edge with bold outlines, but without a tree to cheer the eye, now opened at some distance to their left. The scene was loneliness itself. An islet near one side of it, entirely covered with the extensive ruins of a castle, tinged of a grey and orange mixture of colours from the lichens, time, and the humidity of the situation, had engendered on its walls, was the only feature suggesting the idea of

man, but rather bringing with it reflections adding to the surrounding dreariness. It was the haunt of myriads of gulls and other waterfowl, skimming in many a circling maze, and producing waving lines of transient silvery light, against those raw, cold, hazy clouds, half concealing the farther boundary of the sheet of water. It seemed as if man had been forced, by the inhospitable climate of this region, to relinquish his dominion to those inhabitants of the storm.

But after leaving this gloomy scene, and climbing for several miles towards a group of hills forming the ridge of that part of the country, the view of a range of grandly-shaped and very lofty mountains, their sides blue with the air of distance, and their summits clothed in a glazed covering of snow, broke upon them through a bold pass.

“Behold the Cairngorums!” said his companion; “we must be near those white-headed gentlemen before we sleep, Mr Oakenwold. Let us put on a little, if you please.”

Amherst readily complied, and urging on Brisk, they rattled down the rocky path, wound over the knolls beyond it, and after a long and dreary ride,

descending through a dull moorland country, they reached a sod-built cottage, on the bank of a clear and rapid stream, running among rocks, and fringed here and there with a few alders and birches.

The ground plan of this curious erection presented a number of *outshots* and *io-fa's*, as such periodical additions are called in the language of Scotland. A broom from the top of one of the chimnies, was the sign that it was a place of entertainment, and here they halted to procure some refreshment for themselves and their horses.

Lochandhu was saluted by the landlord, a red-faced little man, in a coarse blue jacket and tartan kilt, who answered his inquiries without leaving the place where he was standing, with his back leaning against the wall of the house, and without withdrawing his hands from the otter-skin purse hanging from his middle, nor did he betray any sign of his profession, but even permitted the horses to be led off to the turf stable, without offering the smallest assistance.

“ Can we have anything to eat, Mr Macphie ? ” said Lochandhu, nodding to him familiarly.

“ Ou, nae doubt, nae doubt ye may that, Sir, ”

replied he, "Stop your ways in—I'se warrant ye'll get some venison, an ye get naething else."

And without altering his position, except only in so far as to turn his face in the direction of the entrance, that he might be the better heard by those within, he, in a loud imperious tone, issued his orders in Gaelic. They were no sooner announced, than a woman, in a grey worsted short-gown, imperfectly concealing her bosom, and a dark-blue petticoat, so short as to exhibit to the knees a tolerably well-turned, but very dirty pair of limbs, bareheaded, and her black hair, that no comb seemed to have divided for many a day, hanging in matted locks over her face, appeared at the door. Leaning with one arm against the door-post, and giving her head a shake, so as in some degree to remove the natural veil from before her eyes, she displayed a very fine set of features, though partaking of the general dirt, every where begriming the rest of her person. On perceiving Amherst and Lochandhu, she stepped forth to one side, and laying her hands over one another in front, she dropped a low curtsy, and saluted them in Gaelic. Lochandhu replied to

her in the same language, as he stooped to enter the house followed by Amherst.

They groped their way through a long passage, having various doors branching off from it, into holes or dens, to right and left, all put in requisition during the fairs and markets, and not unfrequently on ordinary occasions ; this place being situated at the union of two of those great military roads, constructed by Government, to facilitate the passage of troops through the solitudes of the Highlands. They entered a little chamber at the end of this passage, lighted by one solitary pane of glass, ingeniously inserted among the sods of the wall, and furnished with a wretched little fir-table, lame of a leg, and propped with a peat, and an old arm-chair, and two stools of similar materials. The place was so small, that there could have been room for no more. An odd sort of apartment this, thought Amherst, to eat venison in !

Lochandhu, with his usual attention to the ceremonies of life, insisted upon Amherst taking the arm-chair, as the place of honour, whilst he, with some difficulty, seated himself on one of the stools, with his back to the window, and thrust

his large jack-booted legs under the table, his formidable dress, and bulky figure, presenting a very whimsical appearance, sunk as it was upon the *creepy*, as he called it, with only his head and shoulders appearing above board.

Whilst they were waiting for the eatables, and talking about indifferent matters, Amherst perceived the light proceeding from the little window to be suddenly diminished, as if some object had approached it on the outside. He commanded a full view of it over Lochandhu's head, and involuntarily started, for, to his no small astonishment, he beheld the hideous face of the *Dwarfie Carline o' the Cove*. She gazed at him for some moments, with a fixed and freezing look. Lochandhu observed his emotion, and was in the act of turning round to discover what gave rise to it. The mysterious female seemed to guess his purpose. Her eyes assumed an extraordinary fire of intelligence, and putting her long bony fingers upon her skinny lips, she looked towards Lochandhu, and shooting a penetrating glance at Amherst, she instantaneously disappeared, long before his companion, hampered as he was, could effect his change of posture. See-

ing nothing at the window, he again turned towards Amherst, who, struck with the earnest manner of the signal, and judging it prudent to conceal the circumstance from his companion, had by this time clapped his hand to his head, as if attacked by some sudden pain.

“ I hope there is nothing the matter with you, Mr Oakenwold ?” said Lochandhu, with an air of alarm.

“ Nothing very material,” replied Amherst. “ A sudden twinge of megrim, to which I am frequently subject.”

“ Emptiness of stomach, I daresay,” replied Lochandhu ; “ you will be better after eating something ;” and rising, with considerable exertion, he hastened to the door, and transmitted a long and deep-toned sentence of Gaelic along the dark funnel of the passage, that was immediately replied to from the other end of the sod edifice, by the shrill clamouring voice of the hostess.

“ Aye, aye,” said he, after listening to what she had said, and resuming his seat, “ she’ll be here directly.”

Accordingly, in a few minutes she came trotting

along the passage, preceded by a savoury steam issuing from a large wooden dish she carried, and which half obscured her person as she entered. It was put upon the table, but it was as speedily removed, and placed on one of the stools, for something had been forgotten. She ran off, and returned with a towel, with which she covered the table. Then she went for knives and forks, and oat-cakes, and salt,—all of which were to be sought for, before the chief part of the entertainment was restored to its proper situation.

“The venison” of which Mr Macphie had spoken, turned out to be a hare, cut down into fragments, and dressed with a very palatable sauce, made of the blood of the animal, seasoned with pepper and onions. During the meal, Amherst could not banish from his mind the strange spectre he had seen; and glancing more than once at the window, he almost expected to see the hideous face still occupying it.

Having finished their meal, Lochandhu called for the horses. Mrs Macphie waited at the door, dressed, in compliment to the gentlemen, in a high cap. Lochandhu anticipated Amherst, by paying her demands. The young

Englishman drew a heavy purse from his pocket, and gave her, as a *douceur*, enough to have paid three such bills, and her courtesy at once expressed her surprise and satisfaction. A Highlander, who was standing talking to Hamish, greedily eyed the golden treasure peeping through the meshes of the purse. The indolent landlord seemed to have remained in the same placé and posture they had found him on their arrival. Nor did he move from the spot now, but bowing his back from the wall, with much dignity, he wished them a pleasant ride.

The travellers now crossed the river, by a narrow high arched bridge, and pursued their way for many miles through a deep forest of very large firs, sown by the hand of Nature herself, and exhibiting, in the bold bendings of their stems, and the wild luxuriance of their branches, all that freedom of growth in vain sought for in the formal modern plantations of the tree. Here they appeared like natives of the soil. The surface of the ground they grew on was varied with knolls and banks, and hills, and hollows, covered with the glossy leaves of the trailing arbutus,—and in the more open parts, the high tops of the

distant Cairngorums broke upon the view, the dark green masses of the foliage, being richly relieved against the pure white of their snowy summits.

About six or eight miles of travel brought them into the great Strath of the Spey, where are the districts of Rothiemurchus and Badenoch. The magnificent scale that nature now appeared in,—the breadth of the valley,—the noble stream by which it is watered,—the grandeur of the mountains bounding it,—the immensity of its natural forests,—the beauty of its numerous little lakes, every now and then bursting upon the eye, or seen glittering through the foliage, as they wound among the knolls of weeping birches,—the lovely form and rich green of some of those isolated hills, rising in the middle of the landscape,—the rocks hung with woods, together with a thousand more minute charms unfolding themselves at every turn, called forth Amherst's admiration, and filled his mind with sensations he had never before experienced.

The sun was on the eve of going down as they entered a birch wood, through which they urged on their horses, with as much speed as the nature

of the road, and the tired state of their animals would admit. Hamish, notwithstanding the length of the journey, trotted on before, with as much alacrity as he did the first minute they set out. Amherst expressed his surprise to Lochandhu.

“Why, the fellow has got his foot on his native soil now,” replied he,—“his pace is mended by it, and I’ll warrant he would run down a horse ere he would tire.”

While they were yet speaking, a rustling was heard among the branches of the underwood, and a tall, athletic, and very handsome man in the Highland garb, sprang into the middle of the path. He was fully armed, with dirk and pistols in his belt, carried a long gun, and was followed by seven or eight men, dressed and accoutred in a similar, though somewhat inferior manner. One of these was the very man who had so earnestly eyed the young Englishman’s purse at Macphie’s. Amherst was startled by the sudden appearance of this formidable party, but he was relieved, by observing that Lochandhu considered them as friends.

“Well, Alexander,” said he familiarly, addressing the apparent leader, “all going well, I

hope?" and then turning round towards Amherst, and addressing him in parenthesis, "a half brother of mine, Mr Oakenwold. After the roebucks, I see, Sandy."

The man, whose face wore an expression that gave Amherst no very favourable opinion of him, glanced a keen side-look at him from under his brows, and then began to talk to his brother in Gaelic, walking by his horse's side as he rode slowly on. Meanwhile, the others, after staring at the stranger, fell into the rear of the line of march, where they maintained a broken whispering conversation in the same language, occasionally stretching their heads forward to catch up the words falling from the two brothers. Amherst, as he rode so singularly attended, could not help comparing himself in his own mind to a prisoner of war, taken, under a strong guard, into the enemy's country. From the frequently and sinister looks he from time to time observed Alexander Macgillivray stealing over his shoulder at him, he was convinced that the brothers were talking about him, and though he did not understand their language, he could perceive from their manner towards each other, as well as

from the tone of their voices, that they were not agreed on the subject they were discussing. On the part of Alexander there were long, eager, and even violent expostulations, at least such Amherst judged them to be, by the gesticulations used to enforce them, whilst they were received, on the other hand, by Lochandhu, with great apparent coolness, and with a few short words, accompanied by a shrug, or a shake of the head, or a whirl of the arm, or, at most, by an energetic slap on his leathern cased thigh, all which, however, Amherst could easily interpret into decided, though temperate negation.

After accompanying them for a good mile or two, in this way, without the least cessation in their dialogue, Alexander Macgillivray sprang up a gravel bank that rose over the road, speaking all the while he mounted, and halting on the top of it, he, with outstretched hand, continued to address his brother, raising his voice, as Lochandhu, with his head half-turned round, walked his horse slowly on; and it was not until the laird was nearly beyond hearing, that he waved his attendants to follow him, and disappeared into the thickets.

“ He is a violent fellow, Sandy,” said Lochandhu, as Amherst joined him. “ You must know, Mr Oakenwold, he is only my natural brother, though, in his presence, I chose to give him rather a more respectable appellation. He is not a bad fellow in the main ; but, as I said before, hot and violent, as such merry-begottens are often apt to be. He is gone to look for deer with these lads. But for all I could say to him about the state of the wind, I couldn’t get him advised to take the right cast, or the proper stand.”

Amherst reflecting within himself that the rhetoric seemed to have been all exerted on the other side, and that the monosyllabic replies of Lochandhu but ill accorded with this account of their conversation, was as little satisfied with this voluntary explanation, as with that he had obtained from him about Macrory in the morning. But the train of thought it excited was speedily snapt, by his companion soon afterwards exclaiming—

“ Mr Oakenwold, I may now almost venture to congratulate you on the safe termination of

your journey, for yonder twinkles a light in the house of Lochandhu."

Amherst was by no means sorry to hear this, for the night had already closed in.

" 'Tis but an humble dwelling, compared to those you have been accustomed to in your own country, and even since you came to Scotland," continued he, after they had emerged from the deep bed of a brook. " But," added he, " it is fortunate that you won't think the worse of it after your last night's lodging. Such as it is, however, I trust that you will be at home in it, and that when you find things not comfortable, or not quite to your liking, you will for my sake believe, that for your sake they would be better, if the owner could afford it. But, stay, we are just almost at the door. You may dismount if you please, and Hamish will show your man to the stables with the horses, and afterwards to the kitchen-fire, where, I daresay by the time he has done up his beasts, he will be right glad of a snug corner. In the meanwhile, permit me to show your way." They now alighted on a piece of soft natural grass near the door, and Amherst followed Lochandhu into the house.