

CHAP. XIV.

HALF A DOZEN OF THE HEBRIDES.

The Hebrides. — Cara. — Gigulum. — Gigha. — The squirting Cave. — The Watch-Cairn. — Keefe's Hill. — The miraculous Well of Toubir-more. — The Brownie. — Islay. — Antiquities. — Milo outdone. — Dinners and Deserts. — Traces of the Lords of the Isles. — Kernes and Gallowlasses. — A Wife upon Trial. — Macdonald's Feud. — Jura. — Corpachs. — The Island of Deer. — The Paps of Jura. — Their Altitude and Character. — The Mountain of Gold. — The Slide of the old Hag. — Corryvraken. — The Legend of the Whirlpool. — The grey Dog's Slap. — A Tub for a Whale. — The Mermaid. — The Song of Colonsay. — Oransay. — A Hebridean Alsatia.

OF the three hundred and odd islands that lie along the western coast of Scotland, and are known as the Hebrides, the most southern* constitute that group of which Islay and Jura are the monarchs, and which form such a leading object in the seaward view from Glencreggan. The half dozen that are most noticeable are Cara, Gigha, Islay, Jura, Colonsay, and Oransay; though

* According to the present reckoning; for Cantire itself, Rathlin Island, and the Isles of Arran and Man were formerly included among the *Æbudæ*.

Cara is very small, and only worthy of notice from its nearness to the shore of Cantire, from which it makes a very pretty object. But all these islands have outlying rocks and islets, to most of which there is a name, and some of which are peopled; so that the half dozen of the Hebrides seen from Glencreggan might really be multiplied to more than six times six. Let us notice a few of their salient features, with their legends and superstitions. Their agricultural and commercial statistics we will leave to the Gazetteers.

First of all come Cara and Gigha (pronounced *Geera*), only three miles and a half from the shore, and but slightly divided from each other. Cara is about a mile in length by half a mile in breadth; Gigha is seven miles long by two and a half wide. In the sound which divides them is the islet of Gigulum, near to which is good anchoring ground for the largest vessels. The navigation on the eastern coast of these islands is rendered dangerous by sunken rocks; but there are many safe bays and harbours. The Mull of Cara is a precipitous rock of iron-stone 167 feet high, having large caves in its base. This is the highest ground in the island. This rock is much frequented by sea-fowl, and the real game hawk is said to nestle here. The highest ground in Gigha is called *Creag bhan* or "the White Rock," and does not exceed 400 feet above the level of the sea. On the western coast, which is

very bold and rocky, are two caves, called the Great Cave, and the Pigeon's Cave. There is also a curious cave called *Sloc-an-leim*, "the Squirting Cave," at the south-west end of Gigha, on the farm of Leim. Here there is a subterraneous passage, 133 feet long, into which the sea flows. About the middle of it is an aperture 8 feet long and 2 broad; and near the end is another, 20 feet long and 4 broad. When there is a surf a perpetual mist issues from these apertures, accompanied with a great noise, caused by the rolling of large stones, which are carried backward and forward by the agitation of the water. A storm from the west causes the sea to rush in with such violence as to discharge itself with a thundering noise, in the form of intermitting jets. Hence its name of *Sloc-an-leim*, "the Squirting Cave," or, literally, the jumping, or springing pit.

The coast of Gigha is so sinuous, that it is not less than 25 miles in extent. On the eastern shore are fine sandy bays, admirably adapted for sea-bathing, and valuable for the fine white sand which they afford for the manufacture of glass. The Bay of Ardmish is about the centre of the eastern coast, and has a good anchorage in six or seven fathoms of water; it is protected by rocks and the headland called Ardmish Point. At the head of the bay are the church and manse. Drimyonbeg Bay is a little farther north; and Tarbert Bay

still higher up, both bays affording good anchorage. There is a ferry across to Tayinloan on the Cantire coast, and communication also with Tarbert by means of a steamer. When it is wished for the Islay steamer to touch at Gigha, a signal is made from a signal-post erected on an old cairn, called *Carn-na-faire*, or “the Watch-cairn,” on a hill commanding an extensive view, and, no doubt, greatly used as a watch-tower in the stirring times of the Lords of the Isles.

There is but little heather in the island; but juniper abounds on the east coast, and is made to give a gin flavour to whiskey. Illicit distillation is believed still to exist in the island. Its fishery chiefly consists of cod, ling, and haddocks, which, with potatoes and oat-meal, constitute the chief food of the inhabitants.* The moss-rose grows wild in the island.

About the middle of Gigha is *Dun Chifie*, or Keefie’s Hill, which appears to have been a strong fortification. Keefie was the son of the King of Lochlin, and occupied this stronghold, where (according to tradition), he was slain by Diarmid, one of Fingal’s heroes, with whose wife he had run away. We shall hear more about Diarmid when we come to the eighteenth chapter. In Cara are the remains of a chapel, 29 feet by 12, with a

* The geology of these islands is fully illustrated in the “Statistical Accounts,” and Macculloch’s “Western Islands,” vol. ii. p. 278; also map, p. 86.

Gothic arched door ; and in Gigha are also the remains of an old church (about a mile from the present church), which are described by Martin and Pennant *, as well as some monumental stones and a cross. The most noticeable modern monuments are those to the memory of the Rev. Dr. Curdie, of the West Indies, who died, aged eighty, at the residence of his nephew, the Rev. James Curdie, minister of Gigha, — and to Captain M'Neill (proprietor of the island), his wife, and two daughters, who were all drowned in the *Orion*, June 18th, 1850.

Pennant also speaks of “a little well of most miraculous quality ; for, in old times, if ever the chieftain lay here wind-bound, he had nothing more to do than cause the well to be cleared, and instantly a favourable gale arose.” † Martin, who visited it at an earlier period than Pennant did, says, “There is a well at the north end of this isle, called *Toubir-more*, that is, ‘a great well,’ because of its effects, for which it is famous among the islanders ; who, together with the inhabitants, use it as a catholicon for diseases. It is covered with stone and clay, because the natives fancy that the stream that flows from it might overflow the isle ; and it is always opened by a *Diroch*, that is, ‘an inmate,’ else they think it would not exert its virtues. They ascribe one

* See also Macculloch's “Highlands,” vol. iv. p. 425.

† Hebrides, p. 198 ; see also Campbell's “Popular Tales.”

very extraordinary effect to it, and it is this; that when any foreign boats are wind-bound here, which often happens, the master of the boat ordinarily gives the native that lets the water run, a piece of money; and they say, that immediately afterwards the wind changes in favour of those that are thus detained by contrary winds. Every stranger that goes to drink of the water of this well, is accustomed to leave on its stone cover a piece of money, needle, pin, or one of the prettiest variegated stones they can find." At the present day, the superstition regarding this miraculous well of *Toubirmore*, is, that if any of the stones that are in the well be taken out of it, a great storm will arise. Some men declared that they had caused a dreadful tempest by these means. In Cara, the *brunie* or brownie is believed in.

Islay (the stronghold of whiskey, enriching the government to more than thirty thousand a year, and bringing more practical results to the exchequer of the present Lord of the Isle, than did all the sovereignty of his predecessors), is about twenty-eight miles long; Jura, thirty-four, the two being divided by the narrow sound of Islay; but as Islay overlaps Jura on the south-west, the two islands, as seen from Cantire, appear to form but one—

Green Islay's fertile shore"

gently sliding behind the rugged coast of Jura. Danish

forts, and Danish-named places, are evidences that Islay was once under the government of the Danes, before it became the possession of the Lords of the Isles. There are many interesting ruins of churches, together with monuments and crosses, which are fully described and figured in Pennant*, and need not be further referred to here. The ruins of as many as fourteen churches have been found in the island, together with many strongholds and castles. Traces of the once powerful Macdonalds, the Lords of the Isles, abound; and many are the legendary tales told of them.

In one legend, Milo is altogether outdone. Five hundred chosen followers formed the body-guard of Macdonald, King of the Isles; and out of these 500 sixteen picked men attended him wherever he went. They had great privileges, and they consequently met with great enemies. One Macphail is said to have destroyed the last sixteen in the following highly ingenious way. He was engaged in splitting an oak-tree, when they came up with the king. Macphail asked them to lend a helping hand; to which they consented. Eight of them took hold of the split on the one side of the tree, and eight on the other. When they were all tugging, Macphail drew out the wedges, when the severed sides of the oak fled to, and clasped the thirty-two hands with a "sense of touch" that was "something

* See also Lord Teignmouth's "Scotland," vol. ii. p. 332.

coarse." The sixteen picked men of the king's body-guard of five hundred were Macphail's prisoners; and their monarch's head might have been cleft by Macphail's axe, before their very eyes. Macphail, however, had too great a regard for the King of the Isles, than to lay violent hands upon him; and he sent him safely home. He then gave his sixteen prisoners a good dinner, feeding them, it may be presumed, as Mrs. Whackford Squeers fed the pupils of Dotheboys Hall; and then, with the aid of his three sons, cut off their heads; a proceeding which he might perhaps term giving them their deserts after their dinners.

At Loch Finlagan, in Islay, on a small island in the midst of a three-mile bay, are the ruins of a castle, a pier*, and a chapel, dedicated to St. Columba; and here was the large stone, seven feet square, on which Macdonald stood when he was crowned, and presented with the sword and the white wand of power. In the Sound of Islay is a small island, called Freughilein, where may be seen the ruins of the square fort of Claig Castle, where the Macdonalds protected the entrance of the Sound, and also kept their prisoners.

The Lords of the Isles found burial-places at Iona,

* "Pass by two deep channels, at present dry. These had been the harbour of the great Macdonald; had once piers, with doors to secure his shipping, a great iron hook, one of the hinges, having lately been found there." (Pennant's "Hebrides," p. 221.) It was founded in the reign of Æneas II., see p. 227.

but their wives and children were buried in the island of Finlagan, in Loch Finlagan; where was another small island, called *Ilan-na-Corlle*, “the Island of Council,” where thirteen judges (the *Armin* or *Tierna*, heads of the principal families) constantly sat to decide differences among Macdonald’s subjects, receiving for their trouble the eleventh part of the value of the affair tried before them. At the south of the island is a harbour guarded by two rocks, called *Creig-a-nairgid*, “the Rock of the Silver Rent;” and *Craig-a-nione*, “the Rock of Rents in kind;” these rocks being the places where the rents of the Isle of Man were paid to the King of the Isles. On the shores of Loch Finlagan were the quarters of his soldiers, the *Carnauch* and *Gilli-glasses*, the first word signifying “strong men,” who fought with darts and daggers; the latter word signifying “grim-looking fellows,” who fought with axes, and were defended by coats of mail. These are the Kernes and Gallowglasses to whom Shakspeare refers in 2 Henry VI., act iv. scene 9; and in Macbeth, act i. scene 2: —

“The merciless Macdonald
 . . . from the western isles
 Of kernes and gallowglasses is supplied.”

One of the Macdonald feuds arose curiously enough, and is characteristic of the customs of those rude though chivalrous times. It seems, that when a High-

land gentleman wished for a wife, he was allowed to take to himself a young lady upon trial. If, after living a year as husband and wife, he did not feel inclined to cement the relationship by marriage, he was permitted to return her to her friends. He could thus have a fresh young lady every year, and not encumber himself by converting his annual into a perennial. This custom was perfectly *en règle*, and obtained in the highest circles. The chieftain of the Macdonalds had, in this way, taken upon a twelvemonth's trial the daughter of the chieftain of the Macleods; and, at the termination of her period of probation, had returned her to her parents. The father was indignant, and considered that a slur had been cast upon his family. He vowed vengeance, not only with sword, but also with fire; saying, that, as there had been no wedding bonfire, there should be a fire to celebrate the divorce. He carried his threat into execution, and devastated Islay; and, from that day, a bloody feud arose between the Macdonalds and Macleods, which it took centuries to quell.

The readers of "The Lord of the Isles" will remember that an Islay minstrel was among those who were met to celebrate the feast in the halls of Artornish; and when Lord Ronald ("the heir of mighty Somerled," the sovereign of Cantire, who was slain in 1164) gave his signal of "high command,"

“Verdant Islay call'd her host,
 And the clans of Jura's rugged coast
 Lord Ronald's call obey.”

Sir Walter Scott's adjectives are here (as always) most correctly applied. The coast of Jura is indeed *rugged*, and the scenery of the island is both bold and bald, and a contrast to *green* and *verdant* Islay. The eastern shore towards Cantire is cultivated; but on the western shore the mountains, in many places, are precipices over the sea, their bases hollowed into vast caves by the action of the water. Here rested the bodies of those who were being conveyed to their last resting-places at Oransay and Iona; and, in stormy weather, the bodies of the dead must necessarily have been detained many weeks in these natural caverns, which are called *corpachs* from this circumstance. Similar caverns are met with at Saneymore, on the western coast of Islay, where, on April 27th, 1847, the Exmouth was wrecked with 240 Irish emigrants on board, only three of whom were saved; many of the others finding their *corpach* in Saneymore Cave.

Jura is connected with the mainland by the ferry of Lagg, about midway on its eastern shore; and from this point a road runs in a southwardly direction, beneath the Paps to Feoline, on the Sound of Islay, where a ferry-boat conveys the passengers to Portaskaig in Islay. While Islay is supposed (by some) to mean in

Gaelic, *An Eilean Ileach*, “the fine, diversified, variegated island,” Jura signifies “the dark, bleak isle,” or “the waste steep.”* These meanings certainly well express the leading characteristics of the two islands; but Macculloch would derive Jura from the Scandinavian *Duir-a*, “the Island of Deer.”† But whatever may be the etymology, there is no doubt about the fact; Jura is an island of deer to the present day; and on its mountains, abounding in grouse and black game, the red deer is the lord of the isle. Gordon Cumming tells us that his famous German rifle, that did such deadly work on tigers, lions, hippopotami, elephants, giraffes, and such small deer, had, ten years

* “The spelling *Duira* and *Diurath*, for the island of Jura, does not change the sound, but seems to indicate a reasonable derivation for the name which is common to the “Jura” mountains, and may well be an old Celtic name preserved, AN DIU RATH, the waste steep, the Jura. There is a local rhyme in support of this view, said to have been composed by a poetess who was a native of some other island.

‘Diu Rath an domhain,
 I’ diu dath an domhain ann,
 Buidhe Dugh a’s Riabhach.’

‘Waste steep of the world,
 And waste hue of the world in it,
 Yellow, black, and brindled.’

These three colours being the most common family names, until very lately, in the island, as well as the distinguishing colours of the landscape, according to the eye of the discontented lady.” — CAMPBELL’S *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, vol. ii. p. 353.

† *Highlands*, vol. iii. p. 148.

before, brought down his first stag on the Paps of Jura.

The Paps are Jura's leading feature. They are the three chief eminences on the southern portion of that mountain ridge which extends from one end of the island to the other, and are named *Beinn-an-Chaolais*, "the Mountain of the Sound" (*i. e.* the Sound of Islay), *Beinn-an-Oir*, "the Mountain of Gold," and *Bienn-sheunta*, "the Consecrated Mountain." The next peak is called *Corra-bhien*, "the Steep Mountain." The highest of the Paps is the central one of the three, *Beinn-an-Oir*, or *Benanoir*, "the Mountain of Gold;" so called "from its metallic appearance," says Lord Teignmouth, but more probably from its summit being the first part of the island to be "tipped with gold" by the rays of the rising sun. *Oir* signifies the east (*Oriens*), or the rising sun. In the Arabian tale, the man who turned his back upon his companions who were looking out for the sunrise, was ridiculed by them for looking towards the west when the sun rose in the east; nevertheless he was the first to hail the sunrise, by pointing out its rosy glow on the summit of a minaret.

The height of *Benanoir* is variously stated. Pennant makes it to be 2420 feet above the sea-level; Lord Teignmouth, 2240; the late Professor Walker, of Edinburgh, 2340; Mr. Wallace Fyfe (in MacPhun's "Guide"),

“about 2700 feet;” Black’s “Guide” (p. 569), 2565; Collins’s “Atlas,” 2470; while Macculloch says that the two chief Paps have a medium height of “about 25,000 feet,”—which, of course, is a misprint for 2500.* Sir Joseph Banks ascended *Bienn-sheunta*, and by actual measurement found it to be 2359 feet above the sea-level, “but it was far out-topped by Benanoir.”† The Paps are quite mammillary in their formation and their geology, and the peculiar stratification of Jura will be found fully described and mapped in Macculloch’s *dry* book. He says that on the summit of the Paps he found the heat very great, the thermometer standing at 72° and being 82° on the shore. Professor Walker boiled water on the summit with six degrees of heat less than he found necessary for the purpose on the plain below. The Professor describes the view from the summit, which includes in its wide circle at once the Isle of Skye and the Isle of Man, as singularly noble and imposing: two such prospects more, he says, would bring under the eye the whole island of Great Britain, from the Pentland Frith to the English Channel.‡ Pennant also describes the extensive view

* But not corrected in the table of *errata*. “Highlands,” vol. iv. p. 419.

† Recorded in the eightieth volume of the “Philosophical Transactions.”

‡ See Hugh Miller’s “Cruise of the *Betsey*,” p. 3.

from the summit. Lord Teignmouth conversed with Mr. Campbell of Jura, who accompanied Pennant in his ascent; and was assured by him that, although Pennant expressed a great dislike to whiskey, he had descended the Paps much more happily than he had ascended them, on the strength of a glass of Glenlivet, of which he had been prevailed to taste on the summit. A strip of rock, running from the western side of *Bena-noir* into the sea, is called *Sariob na Cailich**, “the slide of the old hag.” The old hag is also supposed to have knocked off the summit of the southernmost hill of the chain in her haste to get to Mr. MacKarter, of Islay. On the north of Jura, between it and the island of Scarba, is the famous gulf, or whirlpool, of Corryvraken, occasioned, it is supposed, by the confluence of the currents of the flood-tide, the stream being opposed (as in the *Maelström*), by a pyramidal rock that shoots up from a depth of about a hundred fathoms to within fifteen fathoms of the surface. Its roar can be heard at a prodigious distance: its sound being like “the sound of innumerable chariots,” says the poet Campbell, in his notes to “*Gertrude of Wyoming*,” where he speaks of the

“Distant isles that hear the loud Corbrechtan roar.”

* For the legend of this old hag, Chaileah Bheine Mhore, and her adventure with MacPhie of Colonsay (which led to her “slide”), see Mr. Campbell’s “*West Highland Tales*,” vol. ii. p. 351. Many curious legends of Islay and Jura will be found in these interesting volumes.

Dr. Macleod, of Glasgow, explains Corryvraken — or more properly *Corrie-bhreacan* — to signify “the Cauldron of the foaming tide,” — from *corrie*, a cauldron; *breac*, foaming; and *ain*, a tide or rapid stream. The popular derivation, however, makes it to be the cauldron of Bhreacan, or, as Campbell says, “the whirlpool of the Prince of Denmark; and there is a tradition that a Danish prince once undertook, for a wager, to cast anchor in it. He is said to have used woollen instead of hempen ropes for greater strength, but perished in the attempt.” Much to the same effect, but with a little more romance and amplitude, Lord Teignmouth tells the legend. But the compiler of the “Statistical Account” of the island gives a different and much fuller and more poetical version of the legend, thus: — “According to a tradition still believed in the Hebrides, Corryvreachkan, or the cauldron of Breachkan, received its name from a Scandinavian prince, who, during a visit to Scotland, became enamoured of a princess of the Isles, and sought her for his bride. Her wily father, dreading the consequences of the connection, but fearful to offend the King of Lochlin, gave his consent to their marriage, on condition that Breachkan should prove his skill and prowess by anchoring his bark for three days and three nights in the whirlpool. Too fond or too proud to shrink from the danger, he proceeded to Lochlin to make prepara-

tions for the enterprise. Having consulted the sages of his native land, he was directed to provide himself with three cables, one of hemp, one of wool, and one of woman's hair. The first two were easily procured; and the beauty of his person, his renown as a warrior, and the courtesy of his manners, had so endeared him to the damsels of his country, that they cut off their own hair to make the third, on which his safety was ultimately to depend; for the purity of female innocence gave it power to resist even the force of the waves. Thus provided, the prince set sail from Lochlin, and anchored in the gulf. The first day the hempen cable broke. The second day the woollen cable parted. There still remained the gift of the daughters of Lochlin. The third day came, the time had nearly expired, his hopes were high, his triumph was almost achieved, but some frail fair one had contributed her flaxen locks, the last hope failed, and the bark was overwhelmed. The prince's body was dragged ashore by a faithful dog, and carried to a cave that still bears his name, in which the old men point out a little cairn, where tradition says the body of Breachkan was interred. From that time, as the legend tells, the whirlpool was called Corryvreachkan."

Lord Teignmouth says that the "faithful grey dog followed his master overboard and reached Scarba, but perished in the lesser Corryvraken, between that island

and Lunga." The Sound which separates these islands is still called "the Grey Dog's Slap" (or passage). A story was told me of a vessel having drifted into the Sound, and being deserted instantly by its crew, with the exception of a boy who was asleep, and did not perceive the absence of his companions or the peril of his situation, till he had arrived on the verge of the gulf. With much presence of mind he cast a tub to the raging monster, which was swallowed up, and satisfied the cravings of his appetite. The waves closed upon it, and afforded a smooth passage to the vessel.

According to the old Gaelic legend, versified by Dr. Leyden, mermaids dwell beneath the waves at Corryvraken; and MacPhail, the chief of Colonsay, was seven months their captive in a coral cave before he was able to outwit them. The moral, therefore, of Corryvraken would seem to be, that its waves are as dangerously beautiful and engrossing as a woman who would allure to destruction, whose "house inclineth unto death, and her paths unto the dead." No wonder then that "the song of Colonsay" should take the form of these words of warning, —

"As you pass through Jura's sound,
 Bend your course by Scarba's shore;
 Shun, oh shun, the gulf profound,
 Where Corrivreckin's surges roar."

Colonsay lies to the west of Jura: it is about ten

miles long, and has the small island of Oransay at its feet, from which it is separated by a narrow strait, which is dry at low water. The smaller island bears away the palm of interest, both from its having been the spot where St. Columba landed (and from whence he rapidly retired to Iona on finding that Oransay commanded a view of his foresworn Ireland), and also from the ruins of its priory for the canons of St. Augustine, which are inferior in interest only to those of Iona. An illustrated description of the ruins and antiquities of these two islands will be found in Pen-
nant; and Lord Teignmouth's book may also be consulted with advantage.

So much for our half dozen of the Hebrides forming that beautiful group of the Highland Archipelago visible from Glencreggan. I trust that no one of them was included among those western isles that were at that time proving an Alsatia for certain English debtors, who, by a sojourn of forty days, were enabled to qualify themselves as residents in the island, and, by the facilities afforded by the Scotch law, go through the operation known as "white-washing," in a very easy and expeditious manner. Mr. Smith, of London, would scarcely recognise in the Mr. Jones of (say) Tobermory, Isle of Mull, that individual Jones to whom he had so confidently supplied goods upon credit; and even if he did, the journey to Tobermory,

and the uncertainty of making good his claim, would be sufficient to deter him from taking any active steps in the matter. This is certainly one use to which the Hebrides may be put, which is *not* recommended for imitation.