

CHAPTER II.

Inn at Inchnadamph—Liberal System of the Duke of Sutherland—Facility of Travelling—Beauty of Country—Loch Assynt—Nest of Osprey—Large Spring of Water—Water-Ousel—Dense Mist—Wild Country near Kylesku—Country between Kylesku and Scowrie—Nest of Osprey; curious position of—Eagle.

BEING under a good and liberal landlord is like being under a good and liberal government; and this we found to be the case at Inchnadamph, which is held under the Duke of Sutherland, or (as he is equally well known here) the “good Duke”—a title, by the way, his Grace may be prouder of than any other that could be invented. Throughout the Duke’s property here the innkeepers hold their houses (and capital ones they are) rent free, and have certain other advantages in hiring their land, and in having every encouragement that the most kind and judicious liberality of the proprietor can give them, on (I believe) the express condition that their inns should be decently kept and the charges moderate. The consequence of which arrangement is that strangers can travel through this otherwise wild and lonely country with every facility and comfort,

and without the disagreeable feeling of being doubly overcharged because they *are* strangers. Nevertheless, with all this facility and comfort, but very few strangers *do* come to see this magnificent scenery, simply, I fancy, because it is little known and not yet the fashion. Most visitors to the Highlands drive straight from their home in England or elsewhere to the ground which they have hired for grouse-shooting or other sporting, and after a certain number of weeks drive straight back again. Very few travel here for the sake of seeing the wild scenery of the north and north-west part of the island, where there is little in the way of game to tempt sportsmen. To me, however, it is the most attractive part of Scotland; and the season I delight in most is during the months of June and July, when the sun scarcely dips below the horizon and it is light during the whole night—light enough, indeed, to read small print with ease without the aid of candles or even of the moon. Backed by that fine old-looking mountain Benmore of Assynt, the inn at Inchnadamph has for its front view the beautiful and extensive loch of Assynt, and one of the finest mountains in the North, called by a name that sounds like Coignaghin. To my English ears, however, the name was quite unattainable. This mountain towards its summit forms a singularly-shaped

cliff, round which I have generally seen one or two golden eagles soaring with strong and majestic flight.

At Loch Assynt, on a peninsula (once an island, and now occasionally so), there are the ruins of an old castle. On the summit of the highest part of the wall is an immense pile of weather-beaten and bleached sticks, which two years ago formed an osprey's nest, but, unluckily, this most interesting bird has been killed or driven from its picturesque and exposed dwelling-place. Nothing could be more characteristic of the bird than this nest perched on the highest corner of the ruin, overhanging the broad lake, which abounds with trout of all sizes. The *Salmo ferax*, or great lake trout, is more plentiful in Loch Assynt than in most Highland lakes. A short distance above the inn at Inchnadamph a spring rises from the limestone rocks which it is worth travelling from London to see. Direct from the ground bubbles up this spring with such power and abundance that it at once forms a goodly-sized brook of the most pure and transparent water that can be imagined. The smallest trout or the smallest pebbles are seen as clearly in its deepest pools as if no water intervened. So bright and clear are the streams flowing out of limestone, that they have rather the effect that a good glass has on a picture than that of making objects indistinct.

We started from Inchnadamph inn in good time in the morning, intending to reach Scowrie, about twenty-one miles distant; but the road being very hilly, and a ferry intervening, we had to reckon on many hours of travelling before we reached our night's quarters. I walked on to look at the osprey's nest on the old castle, and an interesting sight it is, though I lamented the absence of the birds. Why the poor osprey should be persecuted I know not, as it is quite harmless, living wholly on fish, of which every one knows that there is too great an abundance in this country for the most rigid preserver to grudge this picturesque bird his share. The fact probably is that his skin is worth something to keepers and others, as they can always get a few shillings for it, and therefore the bird is doomed to destruction. The "*auri sacra fames*" will soon put an end to his race in this country.

In the midst of a steep and tolerably high waterfall, perched on a small piece of projecting rock, and surrounded by the dashing water, I saw one of my favourite birds, the water-ousel, his white breast conspicuous even amongst the white foam. A twisted birch and a bunch of bright green fern growing out of the rock, constantly watered by the spray of the fall, made as pretty a little scene for a painter as I ever saw. Water-ousels seem to prefer

picturesque dwelling-places, or rather, I suppose, they choose such spots as being better suited for placing their curious-shaped nest in than any other.

While I was examining a kind of simple but most serviceable stone-mill, used for grinding the stone of which these excellent roads are made, the carriage came up, and we proceeded. Coming to a road leading off the main one, and going straight up a hill northwards, Dunbar assured us that this was our route; so with rather an envious look at the straight level road before us which we were leaving, we turned our faces to the hill. After going about two miles, not quite perpendicularly (the way gradually getting worse), we suddenly came to an abrupt termination of the track. Through the driving mist, which had now become quite thick, we saw a most desolate-looking house some few hundred yards off, and there found that we had turned off the road too soon, and had to retrace our steps.

The next turning off was the right one, and we laboured again up the hill, northwards, but with a better road. The higher we ascended the denser was the mist; and though we occasionally heard the grouse-cock crow pretty near us, we could see nothing, absolutely nothing, except the road under our feet.

I was amused by my friend's good-natured philosophy: when I lamented loudly the curtain of mist which was entirely shutting out the magnificent hill under which we were then passing, he comforted me by saying that he preferred almost the scene as it then was (the mist occasionally giving us a momentary peep at some gray rock, and then shutting it out), as it added a kind of mysterious interest to the wild scenery through which we were passing.

After working our weary way up hill for some time we crossed the highest ridge of our road and began to descend towards the ferry of Kylesku, by which we were to pass an arm of the sea that runs a considerable distance inland. As we came lower the mist gradually disappeared, and at last we were fairly out of it, although it remained as dense as ever above us, quite concealing all the higher grounds. I never saw such a confusion of rock and stone as we passed through for some two or three miles. The rocks seemed to have been splintered and broken up by some great convulsion of the earth; all looking broken and angular, none of them wearing a round weather-worn appearance, or being much overgrown with heather or herbage.

Eagles are by no means scarce in this part of the country, but as they hunt principally in the

higher districts, they are not seen so often as might be expected, excepting by an eye that is accustomed to them.

Having rested our horse and drank *tea* (the only meal we could get) at the ferry-house, we managed to persuade the landlord, who was also ferryman, to leave the hot whisky and water which he was drinking with some acquaintance of his own at that hour, twelve A.M., and ferry us across.

We entered into conversation with a shepherd on the north side of the ferry, who told us of a nest of the "Eagle Fisher," as he called it, on an island in a loch not very far from the road; so we appointed the man to meet us the following morning at a certain place, and drove on to Scowrie, through a succession of the most wild and rocky passes, along which the road is carried with a skill that does infinite credit to the engineer who formed it. Occasionally the scene is varied by glimpses of the sea, studded, as it there is, with islands. The country continues still of the same aspect; consisting of the most confused and disorderly chaos of broken and rugged rocks, but with rank heather and warm sheltered corners and nooks, with little clumps of birch-trees already in full leaf. Many, too, of the innumerable deep-looking lochs by the roadside have islands covered with birch and rank heather—the

haunts of numbers of otters. There seems a great scarcity of birds of all kinds; which is accounted for by the number of marten and wild cats who live here, amongst the great and nearly inaccessible masses of rock, in the most perfectly undisturbed security. Cuckoos, wheatears, and ring-ousels seemed to be almost the only feathered inhabitants, with an occasional pair of ravens or peregrine falcons.

The inn at Scowrie, kept by a man of a most un-Highland name, viz., "Tough," is excellent, and most cleanly and comfortable did we find it, and the people full of civility. Unluckily there were two shiploads of emigrants on the point of leaving a harbour near Scowrie, and their friends were wishing them a good voyage in many a bumper of whisky, with the usual accompaniment of bagpipes and reels; so that what with their songs, their music, and the beating of their feet, as they danced under the inspiration both of whisky and pipes, there was a tolerable noise kept up till daylight. But mountain travelling and a feeling that it was impossible and unjust to be angry with the poor fellows enabled me soon to sleep as comfortably as if all had been still.

At daylight, according to appointment, I started with Mr. Dunbar in the boat, but drawn by a small Highland pony whose services we had engaged, for the purpose of getting to the nest of the "Eagle

Fisher," as the osprey is sometimes called in Gaelic. At the nearest point of the road to the lake we unshipped the boat, and making traces out of rope, we fastened the pony to it, leaving the under carriage and wheels by the roadside; we then managed to get the boat to the water's edge, the pony scrambling, in a manner practised only by mountain-bred ponies, over bog and rock, dragging the boat after him, while we did our utmost to keep it from injury, or from getting stuck in the rough ground.

I was delighted beyond expression at seeing the two ospreys, one of them on the nest and the other soaring above the loch, uttering cries of alarm at our approach.

The nest was placed in a most curious situation. About a hundred and fifty yards from the shore there rose from the deep water a solitary rock about ten feet high, shaped like a broken sugar-loaf or truncated cone: on the summit of this was the nest—a pile of sticks of very great depth, evidently the accumulation of many breeding seasons, as the osprey returns year after year to the same nest. How this heap of sticks withstood the winter gales without being blown at once into the water puzzled me. In a crevice of the rock was a small tuft or two of green, otherwise it was perfectly bare and steep.

We launched our little bark and were soon

pulling strongly against a head wind across the loch. The female osprey allowed us to approach within two hundred yards or so, and then leaving her nest, sailed upwards with a circling flight till she joined her mate high above us.

Having reached the rock, and with some difficulty ascended to the nest, our disappointment may be imagined when we found it empty. From the old bird having remained on so long, we had made sure of finding eggs in it. The nest itself, however, was interesting to me, perched as it was on the very summit of the rock, and composed of large sticks, every one of which must have been a heavy burden for a bird of the size of the osprey. In the centre of the pile of sticks was a cup-shaped hollow, the size of a boy's cap, lined with moss and dead grass, and apparently quite ready to receive eggs. It was of no use lamenting, so we turned our boat towards the landing-place, and drifted back quickly and in silence. Some hooded crows, perceiving that both the ospreys were off their nest, immediately made a dash towards it, and I was much amused at seeing the skirmishing between these mischievous and cunning marauders and the two ospreys; the latter fighting simply *pro aris et focis*, having no eggs or young to defend; while the crows fought lustily in the hope only of

finding something in the nest, calculating, probably, as we had done, that the ospreys would not have been sitting on an empty nest.

On returning to the inn at Scowrie I found that my friend had been more profitably employed in catching a dish of fine-looking though muddy tasted trout in a small rushy loch close to the inn.

One of the Duke of Sutherland's foresters brought in a very fine white-tailed eagle, which he had shot the day before: unluckily the plumage was quite destroyed in consequence of the keeper having, to "make sure," discharged his gun at the bird a second time after it had fallen, in consequence of which the head was nearly blown off. I procured, however, some feathers for the large salmon fly which we fish with in the Spey river, in making which the eagle's feather is the principal material employed.

