



Entrance to Bay of Cromarty.

## CHAPTER XXII.

## OCTOBER.—PART II.

## A SEA-SIDE WALK IN OCTOBER.

Beauty of a fine October morning—Departure and arrival of Birds—A walk along the Coast—The Goosander—Golden Eye and Morillon—Plovers—Widgeon; habits of in feeding; occasionally breed in Scotland—Sands of the Bay—Flounders—Herons—Curlews, Peewits, etc.—Oyster-birds—Mussel Scarps—Sea View—Longtails—Mallards—Velvet Ducks; mode of feeding—Rabbits and Foxes—Formation of the Sandhills; remains of antiquity found in them—Seals—Salmon-fishers—Old Man catching Flounders—Swans—Unauthorised Fox-chase—Black Game—Roe.

CHARMING to every sense is the first return of spring: but quite as enjoyable is a fine dry autumn day, and far more invigorating is the first frosty morning than the breath of the most balmy spring breeze that ever gave life to bird or butterfly. In this part of the island, too, spring is at best but a capricious and uncertain beauty, and in the course of four-and-twenty hours one is burnt by an almost tropical sun, and cut in twain by an east wind which seems to have been born and bred in the heart of an iceberg.

Not so in autumn, or at any rate during the

early part of it. In October, the equinox being tolerably well over, and the more severe frosts of winter not yet set in, nothing can exceed the exhilarating feeling which comes with every breeze. How beautiful is the rising of the sun!—bright and red, it casts a splendour of colour, in every gradation of light and shade, on the rugged mountains of the west, whose summits, already capped with snow, have the hue and refulgence of enormous opals; the sun too rises at a proper gentlemanlike hour, so as to give every one a chance of admiring him on his first appearance, instead of hurrying into existence too early for most of the world to witness his young beauties.

From my earliest days I rejoiced more in autumn than in any other season. “*Pomifer autumnus*” calls forth in the schoolboy’s mind a remembrance of apples and fruit, ripe and ruddy. In later years autumn (and October is undoubtedly the prime month of that season) fills us with thankfulness for the abundance and variety of the productions of the earth. As I wander now in the wilds and woods, by river and glade, on every side the changing foliage of the different trees displays an endless variety of beautiful colours. Every thicket and grove has its rich mixture of emerald green, bright brown, and different shades of gold and red.

Every day too has its interest in the eyes of the dweller on this coast, for the arrivals and departures of different birds are unintermitting. An infinite variety of wild-fowl come over from the north and north-east, while our summer visitants, such as the landrail, cuckoo, swallow, and most of the insect-eating birds, disappear. One of my most favourite walks is along the coast, beginning at the mouth of the river and following the shores of the bay till I reach the open firth; then after continuing along the beach for three or four miles, I return through the wild uncultivated ground which divides the sea-shore from the arable lands. At this season the variety of birds which are to be seen in the course of this walk is astonishing. Starting from home soon after sunrise, with a biscuit in my pocket, my gun or rifle on my arm, and my constant canine companion with me, I am independent for the day. Bright and bracing is the autumn morning; the robin sings joyously and fearlessly from the topmost twig of some rose-bush as I pass through the garden, whilst the thrushes and black-birds are busily employed in turning up the leaves which already begin to strew the walks as they search in conscious security for the gray snails, repaying in kind for the strawberries and cherries they have robbed

us of; and welcome are they to their share of fruit in the season of plenty.

The partridges, as I pass through the field, seem aware that I am not bent on slaughter, but on a quiet walk of observation; and instead of rising and flying off as I pass them, simply lower their heads till I am beyond them, and then begin feeding again on the stubbles.

From the pools at the end of the river a brace or two of teal and snipes, or perhaps of mallards rise, and probably one or two are bagged, as I make no scruple of shooting these birds of passage when they give me an opportunity.

Looking quietly over the bank of the river, I see a couple of goosanders fishing busily at the tail of a pool. They are not worth eating, and I do not just now want a specimen; so after watching them for a short time, as they fish for small trout, I walk on, leaving them unmolested. If however I show any portion of my figure above the bank, their quick eye detects me, and after gazing for half a minute with erect neck, they fly off; at first flapping the surface of the water, or almost running along it; and then gradually rising, wend their way to a few pools higher up the river, where alighting they re-commence their fishing.

The golden-eye duck and the morillon also are frequently seen diving for shell-fish and weed in the deep quiet pools, but never fishing in the shallow parts of the river like the goosander.

The peewits do not leave us till quite the end of October, and during most of the month are in immense numbers on the sands near the mouth of the river. In the dusk of the evening they as well as the golden plover leave the sands, and take to the fields in search of worms and snails, generally frequenting the ploughed land or the grass-fields. As I pass along the shore of the bay, large flocks of widgeon fly to and fro as the ebb-tide leaves uncovered the small grassy island and banks. Unlike the mallard and teal, both which are night-feeding birds, the widgeon feeds at any hour of the day or night indiscriminately, not waiting for the dusk to commence their search for food, but grazing like geese on the grass whenever they can get at it. Although towards the end of winter the shyest of all water-fowl, the widgeon, at this season, owing to their not having been persecuted and fired at, may be easily approached, and with a little care may be closely watched, as they swim to and fro from bank to bank; sometimes landing, and at other times cropping the grass as they swim along the edge. If a pair of mallards is amongst the flock,

the drake's green head is soon seen to rise up above the rest, as his watchfulness is seldom long deceived; with low quacking he warns his mate, and the two then rise, giving an alarm to the widgeon. The latter, after one or two rapid wheels in the air, return to their feeding-ground, but the mallards fly off to a considerable distance before they stop. 'Tis as well to make the widgeon pay tribute, so creeping to the nearest part of the bank I wait till a flock has approached within shot and in close rank, and giving them both barrels four or five drop. If any are winged my dog has a tolerably hard chase; for no bird dives more quickly than the widgeon: and they invariably make directly for the deep water, taking long dives, and only showing the top of their head when they are obliged to come up to breathe. Both male and female have the same sober plumage at this season; nor are the drakes in full beauty till January. I shot a brace of widgeon on the 8th of September this year, which is a month before their usual time of arrival. A flock of eight passed over my head, nearly a quarter of a mile from the sea, and I killed two of them—one apparently a young, and the other an old bird. I am inclined to think that they had been hatched in this part of the country. Although they leave us regularly in the spring, I have been told by an old poacher that he

has no doubt a pair or two, probably wounded birds, remain about some of the unfrequented lochs and breed, as he says that he has occasionally seen widgeon in summer in one or two places in the neighbourhood, but that this is rare. As my informant has a *very accurate* acquaintance with most birds, I believe his account to be correct. The widgeon that I saw on the 8th of September had very much the appearance of a brood which had been hatched near at hand, one of the birds not having arrived at that fulness and hardness of plumage that would enable it to have made a long aerial voyage. In Sutherland they breed every year.

I have a long walk before me, and bright as an October day is, the sun does not give us many hours of his company, but seems to be in a great hurry to hide his glorious head behind the snowy peaks of Inverness-shire.

In crossing the sands of the bay in order to arrive at the neck of sandy ground that divides it from the main sea, there are many runs of water to be waded, some caused by the river itself, which branches out into numerous small streams which intersect the sands, and some made by two good-sized brooks which empty themselves into the bay. In all these streams there are innumerable flounders, large and small, which dart as quick as lightning from under



your feet. Their chief motive power seems to lie in their broad tails, with which they propel themselves along at a wonderful rate ; then suddenly stopping, they in an instant bury themselves in the sand; and it is only a very sharp eye that can detect the exact spot where they are by observing their outline faintly marked on the sand in which they are ensconced : sometimes also their two prominent eyes may be discovered in addition to their outline.

It is a favourite amusement with my boys in the summer to hunt and spear the flounders which remain at low water in the pools and runs of water in the bay. On a calm day, by wading to where the water is a foot or two in depth, they kill, with the assistance of a long light spear, a basketful of good-sized fish.

When a flounder is taken out of the water and laid on the moist sands, by a peculiar lateral motion of his fins he buries himself as quickly as if still in his own element.

The large gulls keep up a system of surveillance over all the calm pools at low water, hovering over them, and pouncing down like hawks on any fish which may be left in them. As the tide ebbs, numbers of herons, also, come down to the water's edge, and keeping up step by step with the receding tide, watch for any fish or marine animal that may suit

their appetite. It is amusing to observe these birds as they stride slowly and deliberately in knee-deep water, with necks outstretched, intent on their prey, their gray shadowy figures looking more like withered sticks than living creatures.

As for curlews, peewits, sandpipers, et id genus omne, their numbers in the bay are countless. Regularly as the tide begins to ebb do thousands of these birds leave the higher banks of sand and shingle on which they have been resting, and betake themselves to the wet sands in search of their food; and immense must be the supply which every tide throws up, or leaves exposed, to afford provision to them all. Small shell-fish, shrimps, sea-worms, and other insects form this wondrous abundance. Every bird too, out of those countless flocks, is not only in good order, but is covered with fat, showing how well the supply is proportioned to the demand; indeed, in the case of all wild-birds, it is observable that they are invariably plump and well-conditioned, unless prevented by some wound or injury from foraging for themselves.

On the mussel scarps are immense flocks of oyster-catchers, brilliant with their black and white plumage, and bright red bill, and a truly formidable weapon must that bill be to mussel or cockle; it is long and powerful, with a sharp point as hard as

ivory, which driven in by the full strength of the bird's head and neck, must penetrate like a wedge into the shell of the strongest shell-fish found on these shores.

Beautiful, surpassingly beautiful, is the view before me, as I rest myself on a height of the sand-hills facing towards the north. The bright and calm sea close at hand, and the variously-shaped and variously-coloured cliffs and rocks of Cromarty and Ross-shire, at a distance in reality of twelve or fifteen miles, but which, as the sun shines full upon them, appear to be very much nearer, and all these are backed by mountains of every form and outline. but of a uniform deep blue tipped with white peaks. The sea as smooth as a mirror except where some sea-fowl suddenly splashes down into the water, making a few silvery circles, which soon disappear. Every here and there is a small flock of the long-tailed duck, diving and sporting in the sea, and uttering their strange but musical cry as they chase each other, swimming rapidly in small circles or taking short flights close above the surface; the whole flock dropping all at once into the water as if shot, not alighting gradually like the mallard and other ducks.

The heavy but handsome velvet ducks ride quietly on the sea in small companies, at the distance of about two hundred yards from the shore,

apparently keeping over some ridge of sand or other feeding-ground, down to which they are continually diving. These birds drift along with the tide till it has carried them beyond the place where they feed; then they rise, and fly back for some distance, looking more like blackcocks than ducks, and dropping again into the water, they continue their diving till the tide has drifted them beyond the end of the feeding-ground; and this they do again and again.

The rabbits which inhabit these sandhills are certainly larger and heavier than those living in the more cultivated country, though their food must consist almost entirely of dry bent, with the variety of a little sea-weed and the furze bushes, which they eat into numerous shapes, like footstools, ottomans, etc.

Foxes almost as tall and powerful as greyhounds frequent this desert region; and their fresh tracks are seen after every tide close to the sea-shore, whither they have been in search of cast-up fish, wounded wild-fowl, and such like.

I never pass over these sand-hills without endeavouring to suggest to myself some new theory respecting their origin, and what was the state of the country which they now cover over. That beneath the accumulation of sand there has once been a range of fertile fields cannot be doubted, as

in different places are seen furrows and other well-defined traces of cultivated land ; yet no account exists of the destruction of these fields by the inroad of the sand ; evidently the change was accomplished suddenly. In many parts of this sandy region there are distinct marks of rushing waters ; ridges of both sand and shingle are cast up in a manner which could only have been effected by some tremendous rush of water ; and strange pyramids of stones also are heaped up in several places, to all appearance by the same agency.

Few remains of antiquity have ever been found here ; indeed, it is rarely these sands are trodden by any foot save that of some poacher in search of rabbits. I have, however, seen a most curious bracelet-like ornament which was found here. It is made of fine bronze, in the shape of a snake, which, it has been supposed, had a head at each extremity, formed of some precious stone ; these, however, are lost, the fastenings having corroded. In shape this relic appeared to me to resemble one of the bands which bound together the fasces carried by a Roman licitor. On further examination it has, I believe, been ascertained that the bronze must have encircled some ornament or weapon of wood, which has rotted away, leaving nothing but the more durable metal.

It has twice happened to me to find human skeletons, or rather the remains of skeletons, lying on the sand, laid bare by some drifting wind, or half disinterred by the subterraneous proceedings of the rabbits. In both cases the remains were evidently of great antiquity, but had been preserved by the dry sand.

Those curiously carved pieces of flint called elf-arrows are not uncommon in some parts of the sandhills.

On one part of the sands, which forms a peninsula at low water, but an island when it is high, I perhaps discover two or three seals lying. Clumsy looking as they are, at the slightest alarm they scuffle off with great rapidity into the water. Once there they feel secure, and rising at a short distance from the shore, they take a good look at the intruder on their domain. Ugly and misshapen as a seal appears on land, he is when in the water by no means an unsightly-looking animal; and he floats and dives with a quiet rapidity which appears marvellous to the looker-on. You see a seal's head appear above the water; and you sit down half concealed, with ready rifle, to wait his reappearance. In a minute or two you are suddenly startled by its rising quietly in quite a different direction; and after gazing intently at you for a few moments with

its dark, mild-looking eyes, the sleek, shining head disappears again below the surface without making a ripple on the water, just as you have screwed yourself round, and are about to touch the trigger of your rifle, leaving you almost in doubt as to whether it is a seal or a mermaid. The Highlanders, however, are by no means prepossessed in favour of the good looks of a seal, or "sealgh," as they pronounce the word. "You are nothing but a sealgh" is a term of reproach which, when given by one fishwoman to another, is considered the direct insult, and a climax to every known term of abuse.

It is curious to observe the seals resting on some shallow, with only their heads above the water, and their noses elongated into a proboscis-like shape. They will frequently lie in this manner for hours together, until the return of the tide either floats them off their resting-place, or some other cause induces them to shift their quarters. The greatest drawback in most localities to shooting seals is the difficulty of getting the animal when killed. Tenacious of life to a surprising degree, a seal, unless shot through the head, escapes to the water, however severely wounded he may be, and, sinking to the bottom, is lost to the sportsman. When shot through the head, he struggles for perhaps a minute on the surface, and then sinks like a stone

to the bottom. A strong courageous retriever sometimes succeeds in towing a dead seal ashore, if he can reach him before he sinks, and has the good luck or judgment to take hold of one of the animal's feet, or "flippers," the only part which the dog can get into his mouth.

A seal has a very acute scent, and can never be approached from the windward. I conceive that their eyesight is less perfect; at any rate they are endowed with a certain dangerous curiosity which makes them anxious to approach and reconnoitre any object which they may have seen at a little distance, and do not quite understand. I have seen a seal swim up to within twenty yards of a dog on the shore, for the purpose apparently of examining him, as some unknown animal. Music, too, or any uncommon or loud noise attracts them; and they will follow for a considerable distance the course of a boat in which any loud musical instrument is played, putting up their heads, and listening with great eagerness to the unknown strains. I have even seen them approach boldly to the shore, where a bagpiper was playing, and continue to swim off and on at a hundred yards' distance.

Notwithstanding their wariness and the difficulty of capturing them, seals are gradually diminishing in number, and will soon disappear from our



coasts. This is owing chiefly to the constant warfare carried on against them by the salmon-fishers, who either destroy them or frighten them away as far as they can from their fishing stations.

On the neck of land at which we have now arrived there is a hut inhabited during the season by a couple of salmon-fishers, whose business it is to attend to the stake-net, which stretches out from near their hut into the sea. A lonely life these men must lead, from March to September, varied only by visits from or to their comrades, who are stationed at the depôt of ice at Findhorn, where all the fish caught are sent to be kept till a sufficient quantity is ready to load one of their quick-sailing vessels for London. But if their life is lonely it is not idle, as the exposed situation of their nets renders them liable to constant injury from wind and sea. At every low tide the men scramble and wade to the end or trap part of the net to take out the fish which have been caught, and to scrape off the net the quantity of sea-weed that has adhered to it during the last tide. Although they do not always find salmon, they are seldom so unlucky as not to catch a number of goodly-sized flounders, which fall to the share of the fishermen themselves; and perhaps once or twice in the season a young seal gets entangled and puzzled in the windings of the

net, and is drowned in it. More frequently, however, the twine is damaged and torn by the larger seals, who are too strong and cunning to be so easily caught.

Frequently on this barren peninsula I have fallen in with a small colony of field-mice. They are in shape like the common large-headed and short-tailed mouse, which is so destructive in gardens, but of a brighter and lighter colour. These little animals must live on the seeds of the bent and on such dead fish as they may fall in with.

The brent goose is not a constant visitor here in the winter. This bird, though very numerous in the Cromarty Firth, does not find in this part of the coast the particular kind of sea-grass on which it feeds. There are generally, however, a small company of these geese about the basin. A few white-fronted geese are constantly here from October to April or May, living either in the lonely mosses near the sea, or about the sands. Of other wild-geese we have no large flocks, except during the time of sowing the oats, when bean-geese arrive in great numbers.

This bay, like that of Findhorn, is always swarming with *waders* of every description, from the curlew to the redshank, and from the smallest kind of sandpiper to the old man we see yonder, who is

wading mid-leg deep in the tide, keeping even pace with the water as it flows in to fill the basin. His occupation was for some time a mystery to me, till approaching him, I saw that he had a singular kind of creel slung to his neck, and a long clumsy-looking kind of trident in his hand. Walking slowly backwards, but still keeping in two-foot water, with poised weapon and steady eye he watches for the flounders which come in with every tide. When he sees one, down goes his spear; and the unlucky fish is hoisted into the air, and then deposited in the creel.

I waited until, having either filled his basket, or being driven to land by the increased depth of the tide, the old man quitted the water. He either had not noticed me or did not choose to do so before he landed. When I accosted him by asking him what luck he had had, I got at first rather a grunt than an answer, as he seemed in no very communicative mood; but having refreshed himself by a spoonful of snuff, which he crammed into his nose with a little wooden kind of ladle, he told me that he "had na got muckle *vennison* the morn," adding that he "did na ken what had driven the *beasts* out of the bay of late;" venison, or, as he pronounced it, "ven-ni-son," meaning in this country any eatable creature, fish, flesh, or fowl. The old fellow

seemed of a most bilious and irritable temperament; and I believe had I not won him over by dint of whisky and fair words, he would have laid his bad success in flounder catching to my shooting wild-fowl in the bay. As it was, he gradually became tolerably gracious, and told me many marvellous stories of the good old time, when salmon-fishers were fewer and seals more plentiful; so much so, that, according to his account, every tide left numbers of these now rare animals in the pools of water in the bay; and a "puir man wha wanted a drop oil or bit seal-skin had only to go down at low water to the pools, and he could get a sealgh as sune as I can get a fluke in these days." Since this colloquy I and the old flounder-fisher have always been on tolerable terms.

The sea in this bay, as well as in other similar ones on the coast, runs in so rapidly that, without keeping a good look-out, there is a chance of being surrounded by the water, and detained till an hour or two after the tide begins to ebb again, which in these short autumn days would be inconvenient, as I am now at least six miles from home, a great part of which distance is over the roughest piece of moss and heather that I know, full, too, of concealed holes treacherously covered over with vegetation.

The first flock of swans which I have seen this season are just arriving in a long undulating line. As they come over the sands where they will probably rest for the night, the whole company sets up a simultaneous concert of trumpet-like cries; and after one or two wheels round the place, light down on the sand, and immediately commence pluming themselves and putting their feathers in order, after their long and weary flight from the wild morasses of the north. After a short dressing of feathers and resting a few minutes, the whole beautiful flock stretch their wings again, and rise gradually into the air, but to no great height, their pinions sounding loud as they flap along the shallow water before getting well on wing. They then fly off, led by instinct or the experience of former years, to where a small stream runs into the bay, and where its waters have not yet mingled with the salt sea. Here they alight, and drink and splash about to their hearts' content. This done, they waddle out of the stream, and after a little stretching of wings and arranging of plumage, standing in a long row, dispose themselves to rest, every bird with her head and long neck laid on her back, with the exception of one unfortunate individual, who by a well-understood arrangement stands with erect neck and watchful eye to guard his sleeping companions.

They have, however, a proper sense of justice, and relieve guard regularly, like a well-disciplined garrison. I would willingly disturb their rest with a charge of swan-shot, could I get within range, but not being able so to do, I must needs leave the noble-looking birds to rest in peace. When I get up from the place where I was sitting to watch them, the sentinal gives a low cry of alarm, which makes the whole rank lift their heads for a moment ; but seeing that they are out of danger, and that instead of approaching them I am walking in the contrary direction, they all dispose themselves again to rest, with the exception of their watchful sentry. In the morning, at daybreak, they will all be feeding in the shallow lakes in the neighbourhood, led there by some old bird who has made more than one journey to this country before now. Wistfully my dog watches the snow-white flock ; but the evening is coming on, and we must leave them.

A desert of moss, heather, and stunted fir-trees, which takes an hour to walk through, affords little worthy of note, with the exception of that fine fellow of a fox who, as we pass on, surveys us from a hillock well out of reach. The gray crows flying and croaking over his head first called my attention to him. Nothing is to be seen now but the top of his head and the tips of his ears, as he lowers him-

self down gradually and quietly the moment he sees me look in his direction. But my dog has got the scent; and off he goes in a vain pursuit. Tractable and well broken as he is with regard to game, no sooner does he perceive the inciting odour of a fox or otter, than, heedless of call or threat, he is off in pursuit. Look now! away goes the fox at a quick but easy gallop, through the swamp, with his tail (*Anglicè* brush) well up in the air. A fox is always a great dandy about his brush; and keeps it free from wet and dirt as long as he possibly can: a sure sign of poor Reynard beginning to feel distressed is his brush appearing soiled and blackened. Ah! the dog has got on his scent again, and begins to press hard on his hated foe; but as I well know he has not the slightest chance against the light-heeled fox, who is always in racing condition, whereas the retriever, with his curly coat and good living, will be blown before he has run a mile. I continue my walk. Presently the dog returns panting like a porpoise; and conscious of his irregular conduct, before he takes his usual place at my side, stops behind a little while, wagging his tail, and grinning in the most coaxing manner imaginable, till he has examined my face with that skill in physiognomy which all dogs possess; then seeing that I cannot help smiling at him,

he jumps boldly up to me, knowing that he is forgiven.

Occasionally a blackcock flies past us. These birds, a considerable number of which frequent this wild region, sleep every night in the highest and roughest heather they can find, in order to guard against the attacks of the fox, who in his hunting excursions seldom walks over that kind of ground, preferring beaten tracks, or the edges of pools or marshes, along which he can walk unheard and easily, till his acute nose warns him of the vicinity of some prey; whereas the strong and large heather in which blackcocks roost cannot be walked over quietly and comfortably by an animal whose legs are so short as those of a fox. The gray hens stand a much worse chance. Led by their maternal instinct to build their nests near the edges of the smoother grounds, where their young, when hatched, can run about, they are so much exposed to the attack of the foxes that scarcely one is left, and before long the breed in this part of the country will be quite worn out.

Up to his knees in a swamp stands a beautiful roebuck, feeding quickly and hungrily on the coarse grasses which grow there; whilst half way up the brae a doe and her fawn are nibbling the faded leaves off a wild-rose bush. By a little manage-



ment I could easily get within thirty yards of them, but I prefer watching them a little while with my glass. The buck has got the wind of me now, and starting up, looks quickly round, and then bounds up the steep brae to where the doe and fawn are standing, and after the whole party have halted on the top for a minute to reconnoitre me, they all bound off again into the densest part of the thicket.

As I approach home, and the evening comes on, different small flocks of wild-ducks pass with whistling pinion over my head, on their way to some well-known stubble. The barley-fields appear to be their favourite feeding ground at this season, probably because there is always more barley left on the ground than any other kind of grain.

The ferryman at the river where I pass tells me that he "is thinking that I have had a long travel, but that I have not got much *ven-ni-son*." In both surmises he is not far wrong, but I have enjoyed my long and rough walk as much—ay, and much more—than I should have done the best battue in Norfolk, or the best day's grouse-shooting in Perthshire. But it is time I should finish my chapter: we all become prosy when talking of our favourite pursuits.

" Navita de ventis, de tauris narrat arator,  
Enumerat miles vulnere, pastor oves :"

And when I once get fairly launched on the subject of wild-ducks and roebucks, mountains and floods, the honest truth is that I know not when to stop, and must, I fear, frequently exhaust the patience of the most indulgent reader.

