

THE OTTER.

Goldsmith, in his animated description of the otter, particularly mentions one he had himself seen, which entered a pond as often as was required, and brought out fish for the use of its master. This fact is certainly extraordinary, for although I have seen various domesticated otters, they all, so far as I could ever learn, fished furtively, and on their own account. I have been assured, however, by a clergyman in Galloway, that there was an otter in Dalbeattie, within the last few years, which purveyed extensively in the same way. Its mistress was a poor widow woman, and the otter, when led forth, plunged into the Urr or the neighbouring burns, and brought out all the fish it could find. The widow rewarded it well for its trouble, and carried the surplus home to her young family.

In June, 1828, I visited a tame otter which is kept at Corsbie House, the residence of the Hon. M. Stewart. A few years previous, a litter of cubs, to the number of three, and all females, were caught at one of the Penningham Locks, and consigned to the care of an ancient domestic, who brought the whole up so far "on the pan and the spoon." The whelps, which at this time were hardly so big as a full-grown rat, were so active, restless, and even vicious, that the woman, while feeding them, was frequently bitten. One of the three was gifted by Mr. Stewart to an English nobleman, and the others, though always firm and united in repelling the attacks of cats and dogs, had so many separate causes of jealousy, and fought so fiercely when left by themselves—that the one at last killed the other. The survivor received the name of Tibby, and was permitted for months to traverse the *but and ben* of her nurse's cottage, and follow her like a dog wherever she went. In this state of comparative freedom, the animal became exceedingly knowing and sly, and not only made free with ducklings, chickens, and hen eggs, but on one occasion furtively stole and carried off a piece of meat from a tureen or pot, long before the broth had become quite cool. At other times she mounted the kitchen dresser, and frisked about with her long tail to the great detriment of the plates and dishes; and for these and similar peccadilloes she was banished forthwith from human society, and confined within four stone walls. A house, in fact, was built for her in the corner of a very beautiful garden: and in this snug retreat she enjoys every comfort, is accommodated with a court of air and exercise, a bed-chamber in the corner, sheltered from the rain, and, what seems most essential to an otter's comfort, a large stone trough, filled with water. A spring brought from some of the neighboring heights enters, and then escapes from the garden: one pellucid pipe feeds the trough, and a second prevents it from running over; and here, in winter as well as summer, the animal may be seen swimming and diving, and assuming the most beautiful attitudes imaginable. For ease, elegance, precision, agility, her performance rivals, or rather outstrips, that of a professor of the tight rope; and like him, too, she pauses at the end of every act—leaning as lightly on the surface of the water as the falcon does on the breast of the sky—to enjoy the plaudits that are ready to be showered on her, or modestly solicit a mouthful of food as the well-earned reward of her innocent exertions. Last year, however, a circumstance occurred that had rather an unfavorable effect upon the otter, and made her forego all her wonted customs of exercise. A mason had been employed to rough-cast the walls of her house, and some of the lime having fallen into the trough, the poor animal's feet were so much scalded, that she became afraid of her natural element. Her appearance suffered from the same cause, and with the view of varying her amusements and improving her health, she was allowed to run about the garden: and then, to the surprise of many, she evinced a great fondness for gooseberries. These she managed to pluck by standing on her hind legs like a dog, but at the same time appeared very well pleased when any one condescended to cater for her. No coaxing could induce her at this time to remain above an instant in the water. The stomach of an otter is perhaps as accommodating as that of a dog; for though fish, speaking generally, form the staple of their food, there can be no doubt that they also prey extensively on fowls. In their natural state, they catch ducklings among the reeds and sedges, as well as moor-game when very young. Of the one in question I can safely state that she climbs her keeper's back, fondles about her like a pup or kitten, and even seems inclined to salute her cheek when permitted to carry her freedoms so far. At other times she bites right and left, and her nurse, after several years' experience, avers, "that she's ay angry when she's hungry, and that she wadna trust her over far yet."

While in Newton-Stewart, in the month of July last, I again visited my old friend the otter, and was happy to find her as sleek, active, and amusing as ever. She had now no dread of the trough or the lime that had defiled it; but, on the contrary, entered the water freely, and while disporting on its bosom assumed, as before, the most beautiful attitudes. On watching her narrowly, I discovered that she could not stand long on her hind legs, that she is remarkably cleanly in all her habits; that, when thirsty, she avoids the trough she bathes in, and applies her mouth to the pipe that feeds it, drinking very little at a time, and occasionally washing her face with her paws. The sight of burning embers frightens her greatly, and her keeper, Nelly Cowan, assured me, that, when

a pup, and an inmate of her cottage, nothing could induce her to go near the fire. She is still, however, so irascible, that I offended her highly by throwing into the trough a small tin vessel. This intruder into her watery home she seemed determined to eject by hook or by crook, and kept tossing it to and fro across the bottom for the space, I am certain, of half an hour. At times she succeeded in raising it to the surface, and as often missed her mark, by opening her paws prematurely. On this occasion, she flew into a high passion, and leaving the bit of tin to its fate for a moment, actually clambered up the side wall of her dwelling, with the view, as Nelly Cowan asserted, of biting, if she could, the nose off the face of the person who had ventured to give her so much annoyance. Altogether, the otter kept at Corsbie House is a great curiosity, and a great ornament to the Hon. Mr. Stewart's garden.

Since writing the above, I have been reminded of another tame otter, the manners of which I was requested to describe in February, 1827, by Norman Lockhart, Esq., Lanarkshire. Some time in the beginning of that year, my informant paid a visit to his friend, Mr. Monteith, of Carstairs, and while about to depart was surprised to see a curious looking animal issuing from the dog-kennel, and anon running about the wheels of his carriage, when called on by the appropriate name of "Neptune." This circumstance naturally led to some inquiry, from which it appeared that the otter was caught in the spring, 1825, when only a few days old, and actually suckled by a pointer bitch! At first it was as wild as the Corsbie cub, but afterwards it became so tame and domestic that the gamekeeper was induced to take it under his especial patronage. And undoubtedly the man had good reasons for so doing. As the purveyor of game, he could do little without his faithful canine *allis*, and the other's services were found equally useful in another way—that is, in procuring a dish of excellent burn trout, when the nature of the weather or season was such, that the finny people refused to rise, whether tempted by bait or fly. Though he frequently stole away at night to fish by the pale light of the moon, and associate with his kindred by the river side, his master, of course, was too generous to find any fault with his peculiar mode of spending his evening hours. In the morning he was always at his post in the kennel, and no animal understood better the secret of "keeping his own side of the house." Indeed his pugnacity in this respect gave him a great *lift* in the favor of the gamekeeper, who talked of his feats wherever he went, and averred besides, that if the best cur that ever ran "only daured to girn" at his protegee, he would soon "mak his teeth meet thro' him." To mankind, however, he was much more civil, and allowed himself to be gently lifted by the tail, though he objected to any interference with his snout, which is probably with him the seat of honor. As an angler, his reputation was advancing so rapidly at the time mentioned, that one or two of Mr. Monteith's neighbors had some thoughts of borrowing him a day or two in spring for the purpose of ascertaining the quality and size of the larger trout in the pools on their estates.

GRASMERE.

The little valley of Easedale is one of the most impressive solitudes amongst the mountains of the lake district. Easedale is impressive, first, as a solitude; for the depth of the seclusion is brought out and forced more pointedly upon the feelings by the thin scattering of houses over its sides and the surface of what may be called its floor. These are not above five or six at the most; and one, the remotest of the whole, was untenanted for all the thirty years of my acquaintance with the place. Secondly, it is impressive from the excessive loveliness which adorns its little area. This is broken up into small fields and miniature meadows, separated, not by stone walls, but sometimes by little hedge-rows, sometimes by a little, sparkling, pebbly "beck," lustrous to the very bottom, and not too broad for a child's flying leap; and sometimes by self-sown woodlands of birch, alder, holly, mountain ash, and hazel, that meander through the valley, intervening the different estates with natural sylvan marches, and giving cheerfulness in winter by the bright scarlet of their barrier. It is the character of all the northern English valleys, that they assume, in their bottom areas, the level floor-like shape, making everywhere a direct angle with the surrounding hills, and definitely marking out the margin of their outlines; whereas the Welch valleys have too often the glaring imperfection of the basin shape, which allows no sense of any absolute valley surface: the hills are already commencing at the very centre of what is called the level area. The little valley of Easedale is, in this respect, as highly finished as in every other; and in the Westmoreland spring, which may be considered May and the earlier half of June, while the grass in the meadows is yet short from the habit of keeping the sheep on it until a much later period than elsewhere, the little fields in Easedale have the most lawny appearance, and, from the humidity of the Westmoreland climate, the most verdant that is possible to imagine; and on a gentle vernal day—when vegetation has been far enough advanced to bring out the leaves, an April sun gleaming coyly through the clouds, and genial April rain gently penciling the light spray of the woods with tiny pearl drops—I have often thought, whilst looking with silent admiration upon this exquisite

composition of landscape, with its miniature fields, running up like forest glades into miniature woods; its little columns of smoke breathing up like incense to the household gods from the hearths of two or three picturesque cottages—abodes of simple primitive manners, and what, from personal knowledge, I will call humble-virtue—whilst my eyes rested on this charming combination of lawns and shrubberies, I have thought that, if a scene on this earth could deserve to be sealed up, like the valley of Rasselas, against the intrusions of the world—if there were one to which a man would willingly surrender himself a prisoner for the years of a long life—that it is—this Easedale—which would justify the choice and recompense the sacrifice. But there is a third advantage possessed by this Easedale, above other rival valleys, in the sublimity of its mountain barriers. In one of its many rocky recesses is seen a "force," (such is the local name for a cataract) white with foam, descending at all seasons with respectable strength, and, after the melting snows, with an Alpine violence. Follow the leading of this "force" for three quarters of a mile, and you come to a little mountain lake, locally termed a "tarn,"* the very finest and most gloomily sublime of its class. From this tarn it was, I doubt not, though applying it to another, that Wordsworth drew the circumstances of his general description:—

Thither the rainbow comes, the cloud,
And mists that spread the flying shroud;
And winds
That, if they could, would hurry past;
But that enormous barrier binds it fast.

And far beyond this "enormous barrier," that thus imprisons the very winds, tower upwards the aspiring heads, usually enveloped in cloud and mist, of Glaramara, Bow Fell, and the other fells of Langdale Head and Borrowdale. Finally, superadded to the other circumstances of solitude, arising out of the rarity of human life, and of the signs which mark the goings on of human life—two other accidents there are of Easedale, which sequester it from the world, and intensify its depths of solitude beyond what could be well looked for or thought possible in any vale within a district so beaten by modern tourists.—One is, that it is a chamber within a chamber, or rather a closet within a chamber—a chapel within a cathedral—a little private oratory within a chapel. For Easedale is, in fact, a dependency of Grasmere—a little recess lying within the same general basin of mountains, but partitioned off by a screen of rock and swelling uplands, so inconsiderable in height, that when surveyed from the commanding summits of Fairfield or Seat Sandal, they seem to subside into the level area, and melt into the general surface. But, viewed from below, these petty heights form a sufficient partition; which is pierced, however, in two points—once by the little murmuring brook threading its silvery line onwards to the lake of Grasmere, and again by a little rough lane, barely capable of receiving a post-chaise. This little lane keeps ascending amongst wooded steepes for a quarter of a mile; and then by a downward course of a hundred yards or so, brings you to a point at which the little valley suddenly bursts upon you with as full a revelation of its tiny proportions, as the traversing of the wooded back-grounds will permit. The lane carries you at last to a little wooden bridge, practicable for pedestrians; but, for carriages, even the doubtful road, already mentioned, ceases altogether: and this fact, coupled with the difficulty of suspecting a lurking paradise from the high road through Grasmere, at every point of which the little partition crowds up, with the capital barriers in the rear, securing, in fact, not so much to blend with them as to be a part of them, may account for the neglect of Easedale in the tourist's route; and also because there is no one separate object, such as a lake or a splendid cataract, to bribe the interest of those who are hunting after sights; for the "force" is comparatively small, and the tarn is beyond the limits of the vale, as well as difficult of approach. One other circumstance there is about Easedale which completes its demarcation, and makes it as entirely a landlocked little park, within a ring fence of mountains, as ever human art, if rendered capable of dealing with mountains and their arrangement, could have contrived. The sole approach, as I have mentioned, is from Grasmere; and some one outlet there must inevitably be in every vale that can be interesting to a human occupant, since without water it would not be habitable; and running water must force an exit for itself, and, consequently, an inlet for the world; but, properly speaking, there is no other. For, when you explore the remoter end of the vale, at which you suspect some communication with the world outside, you find before you a most formidable amount of climbing, the extent of which can hardly be measured where there is no solitary object of human workmanship or vestige of animal life, not a sheep-track even, not a shepherd's hovel, but rock and heath, heath and rock, tossed about in monotonous confusion. And, after the ascent is mastered, you descend into a second vale—long, narrow, sterile, known by the name of "Far Easedale:" from which point, if you could drive a tunnel below the everlasting hills, perhaps six or seven miles might bring you to the nearest habitation of man, in Borrowdale; but, crossing the mountains, the road cannot be less than twelve or fourteen, and, in point of fatigue, at the least twenty. This long val-

* A tarn is a small lake, and always, as I think, lying above the level of the inhabited valleys and the large lakes; and subject to this further condition, that it has no main feeder.