

OVER THE BUCK.

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ALTHOUGH a Scotsman by birth and upbringing, I had it as my lot to spend a good many years of my life in England. That was long ago, but I have still a vivid recollection of the pleasure with which from time to time I revisited my native land, and particularly of the rare delight which a few days' ramble among the hills afforded me. Once in the seventies I had a week to spare, and spent the greater part of it in walking. I started at Dunkeld, and tramped by the Pass of Killiecrankie to Blair Athole, where I spent the night; then next day walked, amid a deluge of rain, from Blair to Braemar, through wild and interesting Glen Tilt; and the following day found my way, partly on foot, partly by coach, and partly by rail, to my native Aberdeen. From Aberdeen I went by rail to Huntly, purposing to make a circular tour from and to that pleasantly situated town.

I left Huntly on the Monday afternoon, and took my way on foot for The Buck, some sixteen or seventeen miles distant. I walked in a southerly direction at first, following for a few miles the dusty turnpike, and then turned off more to the westward, making my way up the lone but picturesque Glen of Kirkney, with its dark streamlet and its bare but romantic hills. "Turn to yer richt, past that plumpie o' trees", said a ploughman to me when I asked him the shortest way to The Buck. I suppose he should have said "clump" and not "plumpie", but being "native and to the manner born", I found no difficulty in understanding what he meant, and, passing the "plumpie", I pursued my way, the burn making music and the birds singing their sweet melodies to me as I went along. On my way I passed Tap o' Noth, a mountain once believed, by some at least, to be an extinct volcano. I once ascended it, and to my eyes—only I was very young then, and did not know much—the top of the mountain

seemed a true crater. Doubtless, however, what seems so like a crater is only the rather perfect remains of a vitrified fort, the strong place of some forgotten tribe. It may be that the mountain was the scene of sharp tribal contests in past ages, but as I passed it its green cone looked calm and peaceful in the sunshine, and the sheep were pasturing safely on its heathery slopes.

At length I came in sight of The Buck in all his majestic grandeur, and, although his height is by no means great, he has great grandeur where he stands. As I went round the corner of a hill, and the shapely and stately cone, with its steep heathery sides, bathed in sunshine from summit to base, rose before me, it seemed a perfect vision of glory. But the afternoon was advancing, and I could not tarry long to wonder and admire. I had to cross a long stretch of moorland, cut by many trickling rills, and yielding to the people dwelling near an abundant supply of peat. There was no special path to follow, so I simply went straight on, leaping the burns and occasionally sinking a bit into the mossy ground. Near the base of the cone which forms the mountain proper, and whose ascent, owing to the steepness, occupied me nearly an hour, I found a few houses, and, refreshed by a draught of excellent water which I got at one of them, I addressed myself to the final climb. As I ascended, new beauties were unfolded to my eyes at every step; hill after hill broke upon my view; lapwings soared about me, uttering their shrill cries; partridges rose at my feet, and flew away with noisy "whirr"; and startled rabbits and hares hurried out of the way of the intrusive stranger. Here and there among the heather or grass I found the cloud-berry in flower. At length I stood upon the top, and all the glory of the surrounding landscape was before me. The Buck is not a rocky hill; its sides are clothed with grass and heather, and there are no wild precipices or giant crags to break its continuity; but at the very top there are some rough masses of granite, which at a distance have the appearance of a cairn. Standing on the highest pinnacle, and planting my feet as firmly as possible—for

the wind was very wild where I stood—I looked abroad on the wondrous spectacle which presented itself to my view. Wherever I gazed there were mountains, some of them among the loftiest in Britain—all of them glorious with the radiant sunshine that flooded them. Southward, bounding the horizon in that direction, lay the wild and striking Lochnagar; westward from Lochnagar towered the huge masses of the Cairngorms; eastward from it stretched the long line of the Grampians, decreasing in height as they neared the sea; while northward of these, again, there rose an endless array of mountain summits, like vast waves turned to stone at the moment of their upheaval.

Among these Aberdeenshire hills, lying scattered, as one might say, everywhere between the Dee and the Moray Firth, I recognised many old acquaintances. There was the Hill of Fare, which, on the testimony of some old woman, I used to believe to be almost as rich in gold as Australia itself. There was picturesque and rocky Bennachie, which I had climbed when hardly in my teens, and where I had first learned how the rain can come down on mountains. And there was Dunnideer, only a hill and not even a very lofty one, but with the ruins on its summit faintly suggesting the castle-crowned crags of Rhineland.

Looking north from my lofty perch, I saw, nearly thirty miles away, the blue waters of the Moray Firth gleaming in the sunlight, and could even descry the white sails of the ships which were leaving or approaching its ports. Beyond the Moray Firth, so clear was the atmosphere, I could distinctly see the mountains of Caithness, specially the bold and conspicuous Morven, their rugged outlines softened by a transparent haze.

I could have lingered long enough on the mountain-top, but the evening was approaching; a mist was gathering in one of the neighbouring valleys, and I deemed it prudent to think of descending. Taking a kindly glance at Ben Rinnes, with which I have had a bowing acquaintance since my boyhood, I sought a sheltered nook among the rough rocks, where I might partake of the homely

refreshment which I had brought with me, and smoke my pipe in calmness and in peace. Then I once more mounted to my perch, and took a last lingering look at the fair and attractive scene. I have a fairly familiar acquaintance with mountains from Ben Nevis downward, but my ideal ascent was that climb of The Buck, everything contributing to make it delightful. Indeed I have never in my fairly numerous wanderings by land and sea beheld a scene on which I have gazed with a thrill of deeper delight than that on which I looked forth, from the rough rocks crowning the secluded hill, on that day in early July long ago. Thank God for this fair world, and for the sensibility to beauty which He has given to man! How much poorer life would have been had this world been less fair, or had man with an eye to behold its beauties been incapable of experiencing delight as he gazed upon them!

I did not take a long time to descend, and a walk of two or three miles brought me to the Manse, where I found a most pleasant host in the kind-hearted and talented minister at that date, the late Rev. Gordon Smart. Refreshed by a good night's rest, I set out for Dufftown, having a not very arduous walk of some nine or ten miles before me. For some miles my path lay along the banks of the Deveron, past long stretches of moorland, and by farms which, in a parish where no Gaelic is spoken, bore strangely Celtic names. Then the river swept away eastward, while I pursued my northward way. Around me were brown hills and burns which sparkled in the sunlight, but there was nothing for a long part of my journey to call for any special notice till I came to a very narrow pass between two hills, the famed "Braes o' Balloch". Thereafter I soon reached the Fiddich and Dufftown. I had only to seek the railway station, and thence find my way back to Huntly, and from Huntly to the busy English town where my home then was. I went back, however, with pleasant memories which no changes coming with the years can efface, and with thankfulness for the breath of mountain air which had so effectively cleared away the cobwebs which in the routine of a busy city life are apt to gather about mind and brain.