

RONA'S HILL.

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MOST folks have some region which appears to them as possessed of a special fascination. Horace had his pet spot, his "nook" that wore for him the fairest smile.

"Ille terrarum mihi praeter omnes
Angulus ridet."

And, although we may not have just the same likings as he had, there will be for us too some chosen spot which it will always be delightful to visit. Speaking personally, I find no region appear so attractive as the Larig Ghru with its surrounding magnificent mountains. I have wandered fairly far afield in my time, but I have seen nothing that appeals to me as do these mighty hills with their grand silence, their sterile and rugged slopes, their dark, mysterious tarns, their rushing burns, their lingering snow-wreaths, and the mists and clouds that, coming and going around their stately summits, add so much to their wonder and their glory. But although there is no region that has for me the fascination of the Cairngorms, there are yet other places that have no little attraction. I love the islands, brown and bleak as many of them are, that surround our coasts. I love them for their free atmosphere, for their girdling seas, for their bold headlands that rise from amid the "yeast of waves". It was my lot long ago to spend a year in the Shetlands, and perhaps it was the year spent in these remote northern islands that made me alive to the charm that lingers around so many of our island groups. I am not, however, writing at present of the attraction of our islands in general, or of the most northerly of them in particular, but of an ascent of Rona's Hill, the highest hill in the Shetlands, which I made well nigh forty years ago.

Rona's Hill, which rises to the height of 1475 feet, is on the mainland of Shetland and in the parish of North-maven. It is in latitude 60° 32' N. or thereabout, and in

longitude about $1^{\circ} 27'$ W. Rona's Voe, one of the finest of Shetland voes, running from the Atlantic Ocean six or seven miles into the land, sweeps round its west and south sides, while its east side slopes well down towards Colla Firth Voe, which opens from Yell Sound. Rona's Hill, as seen from the east, is a brown hill, such as many of our familiar Scottish hills are. On its south-west side it appears, in its lower portions at least, far more rugged and picturesque. But as seen from any point of view, it is a fine, shapely hill, and rising, as it does, practically from the level of the sea, it presents the appearance of very considerable height. In the old days, when the hardy Shetland men went to the deep-sea fishing ("the haaf") in their six-oared boats, the top of Rona's Hill was often the only land that the Northmaven fishermen kept in view. They would be at least thirty miles off.

I first saw Rona's Hill early in the November of 1864. I had sailed from Lerwick in the smack "Gossamer"—there were no steamers plying among the islands in those days—and had been two days at sea when the smack reached Ollaberry, just as the short winter day was drawing to its close. I had to get to Hillswick, on the west side of the island, and seven miles away. There was not then (and there may not be now) any quite continuous road leading directly from Ollaberry to Hillswick, and I put myself under the guidance of an elderly fellow-passenger who was going the same way. In the darkness my guide lost his way—his own explanation was that he had been misled by the "trows" (trolls or spirits)—and we wandered about aimlessly for hours. We were able, in spite of the darkness, to make out the form of the big hill to the north of us, and, quite ignorant that Rona's Voe lay between us and the hill, I had intimated my intention of climbing a bit to see if I could discover from the hillside any light to which we could make our way, when a very distant light caught my eye. It was really miles away to the north-east, and we ought to have been going west, but it was a light, and we made for it. Fortunately, in trying to make our way to it, we came upon the house of

a kindly crofter, who guided us to our destination. His house was barely two miles from the point from which we had started!

My meditated ascent of Rona's Hill was not made that night therefore, but from that night I determined that one day I should make the ascent. It was months, however, before I accomplished my purpose. One fine day in August, 1865, having found a willing companion, I set out to climb the hill. Our point of departure was Northroe, where we were living. Northroe is on the east side of Northmaven Parish, and some three or four miles south from Fethaland Point, the extreme point of the mainland of Shetland. I believe that there is a good road now right from Fethaland, but such a thing did not exist in 1865. A road had no doubt been contemplated, and to the south of Northroe a few miles had some time or other been constructed, but the portion made had not been kept up: there were places here and there where one sank deep into the mossy subsoil, and it was, on the whole, better to keep to the moss, which professed to be only what it was. However, my companion and I were young, the road, such as it was, was familiar enough, and we went merrily on our way. Our direction for two or three miles was southward, and to the west of our route we had the "Byörgrs" (I am not sure that my spelling is correct), strange slopes covered with fragments of red granite. At one point on our way we passed two large upright stones known as the "Giant's Grave". I was never able to discover any tradition connected with them, although I believe that there must have been some legend which has been lost. Further on we passed through a kind of small gorge or cleft known as the "Blue Hammer". A good man whom I knew was sorely beset there one night by the "trows". He saw nothing, he said, but his hair stood on end. We kept on along the west shore of Colla Firth Voe, and between the south-west angle of that voe and the head of Rona's Voe began our ascent. I am writing from memory, and it is not easy, after the interval of more than thirty-seven years, to remember all the

minutiæ of a day's wanderings, but I think we did not find the climb particularly difficult. Of course, the ascent was fairly steep—we had to climb over 1400 feet in a little over two miles—but I can remember no specially rocky places, and only a few very marshy spots. What I do remember is the altogether wonderful view from the top. The summit itself is rather stony than rocky, the stone being a brittle red granite; but it is not the mountain top, but the unique and indeed splendid prospect which, under favourable circumstances, one has from it, that holds one's mind and lingers in one's memory. We were exceptionally fortunate in the day of our ascent. There was not a cloud in the heavens, the blue ocean met the blue sky in the far distance, and the hundred isles of the Shetland group, with the shining waters winding among them, lay beneath our feet. We saw, if my memory does not play false with me, the Muckle Flugga lighthouse, the most northerly lighthouse in the British Islands. We saw the large islands of Yell and Unst, and, if I do not mistake, some portion of Fetlar, the most easterly, save the Out Skerries, of the Shetland group. Lerwick was not visible, but we saw the island of Bressay lying across the sound from it, and though Bressay was from thirty to forty miles away, we could distinguish its corn fields by their yellow tinge. Looking towards the Atlantic, we saw the magnificent Bay of St. Magnus, curving finely towards us from between Eshaness and Papa Stour. There is no grander bay, I think, in the United Kingdom than this one, on whose broad bosom whole navies might easily float. In the south-west we saw the bold island of Foula, towering right out of the Atlantic to an altitude of 1372 feet. The whole island is little over three miles in length, and only between two and three in breadth, but, small as it is, its cliffs are so magnificent, so stupendous indeed, that were it more accessible it would draw to it an endless stream of admiring tourists. I believe that, to be seen in their full grandeur, these cliffs, rising in three gigantic steps over 1200 feet, should be viewed from the deck of a vessel sailing along the west

side of the island, but, from any point of view, Foula is splendidly impressive.

But distant Foula, said by some to be the Thule of the ancients, was not the most remote island which we saw. Looking south, or a little to the west of south, we could discern, and quite distinctly so, although low on the horizon, the isolated Fair Isle, which, lying about midway between Sumburgh Head in Shetland and North Ronaldshay in Orkney, was little less than seventy miles away from us. The Wardhill, or Warthill, of Fair Isle is over seven hundred feet high, and a simple mathematical calculation will show that it should, under favourable conditions, be visible from the top of Rona's Hill, even without taking into account looming, which always increases the distance at which objects on the horizon are visible. Yet it was, I fancy, a comparatively rare experience that we had in seeing Fair Isle so clearly, for sea fogs, common enough in those latitudes, must often hide it from view.

Had we not a great reward for our little exertion? The Shetland islands are pretty remote, and to one who suffers from sea sickness, Sumburgh Roost is rather objectionable, but to any one who cares for a vision which will endure while memory lasts, I would say—See Shetland, and, without fail, climb Rona's Hill. My friend and I lingered long on the summit, and very reluctantly turned our faces homeward.

We did not return by the route by which we came. Looking to the north-east, we saw that the mountain sloped away towards the Bergs of Skelberry, which, as I have said, are locally called the Byörgs, and we made our way down along the slopes. To the north of Rona's Hill there is quite a chain of lakes of varying size, one of the largest and the most easterly of them being Roerwater. Out of this loch flows the burn of Roerwater, which falls into Colla Firth Voe. When we had crossed the burn we were little more than two miles from home, but we were hardly home when the weather changed, and rain fell in torrents. Only, our day had been more than delightful.