

THE CHARM OF THE HILLS.

THE year that has just faded into the past is a year to be remembered in mountaineering annals. It is unique in history for the number of accidents that have happened to climbers. The snows and the precipices of the Alps have claimed a lamentable number of victims; and in England the tragic calamity at Scafell is still fresh in the minds of men. As we reflect upon these accidents, and as we read of the deaths of climbers, some in the bloom of youth, some in the pride of manhood, all suddenly and without warning removed from this world, to thoughtful minds it is surely not unprofitable to consider for a moment wherein lies the charm of the hills.

In the works of older writers of this country we find little mention of the beauty of mountain scenery; still less appreciation do we find in the names of the mountains themselves. Our Gaelic forefathers did not overtax their imaginations in giving names to the omnipresent hills. On the rare occasions on which they did bestow a name suggesting to us something more than the idea of size and shape, it was to emphasise not the beautiful side, but the terrible. We remember the Ben Uarns and the Learg Ghrumach, the hills like Hell, the pass that chills one's blood. To them, indeed, a cultivated field was one of the most beautiful sights in nature. They shared Bailie Nicol Jarvie's ideas. The hills were gruesome, to be shunned at all times, and above all in the time of winter. In that season, no doubt, men had often to traverse the glens and moors; but they did so against their will. Their eyes were shut against the wild magnificence of Nature. Their thoughts were like Elrigmore's in "John Splendid":—"We were lost in a wilderness of mountain peaks; the bens started about us on every hand like the horrors of a nightmare, every ben with its death-sheet; menacing us, poor insects, crawling in our pain across the landscape". To them his idea of Glencoe would have appeared natural

and reasonable:—"I glanced with a shiver down its terrible distance upon that nightmare of gulf and eminence, of gash, and peaks afloat upon swirling mists. It lay, a looming terror forgotten of heaven and unfriendly to man (as one would readily imagine), haunted for ever with wailing airs and rumours, ghosts calling in the deeps of dusk and melancholy, legends of horror and remorse. 'Thank God', said I, as we gave the last look at it—"Thank God I was not born and bred yonder. Those hills would crush my heart against my very ribs". And save a few of high poetical nature we meet with no characters in fiction or in real life like Allan Stewart in "Kidnapped", or like the exquisitely drawn llama in "Kim", whose heart, as he toils through the sweltering plains of India, is athirst for the snow and the hills of his far-off home.

In modern times, however, there has come a great change. It is not only poets who feel the mystic charm of the mountains; over countless others of high and humble station this charm exercises a great influence; and in their hearts there is awakened a deeply sympathetic chord at the story of Sir Walter Scott's homecoming from the sunny shores of Italy, of his eyes filling with tears as the distant outlines of the Eildons burst upon his view. "One touch of nature makes the whole world kin": and that Cecil Rhodes should wish to be buried on the heights of the Matoppos seems to us most natural—for the remains of a great man, a great resting-place. To-day, not only are men in increasing numbers every year attracted and fascinated by the grandeur of the mountains, but there are also clubs and journals which owe their existence to, and which foster, a love for the everlasting hills.

"Two Voices are there: one is of the Sea,
One of the Mountains; each a mighty Voice".

Of these voices, calling continually to men to leave for a while the smoke and dust, the toil and worries of the present world, and to taste of the freshness of the world while young, it would be hard to say which is the mightier.

Yet one difference between the sea and the hills may be briefly noticed. As we think of the sea, we cannot avoid thinking at the same time of man, of his weakness and of his power. For on every sea we find traces of man, alike in the Pacific, with its far-separated coral isles, and in the cold Arctic, choked with fogs and towering icebergs. Everywhere and at all times on the sea is to be found toiling the hardy race of man. There flash the beacons of lighthouses; there go the ships; and there are countless leviathans of iron and wood taking their journey therein.

The hills, for the most part, do not suggest to us thoughts of man, and bear few traces of his power. Man comes, and climbs, and vanishes: compared with him they are eternally the same; and this it was that impressed so deeply the mind of the shepherd boy watching his flocks on the hill-sides of Judaea, with the deep blue eastern sky or the twinkling stars above him, and led him long afterwards to speak of the hills as everlasting.

The solitude, then, and the silence of the hills attract men rather than repel them. They are glad to escape from the mental strife and feverish hurry of modern life to the pines and the purple heather, to a silence unbroken save for the murmur of the tumbling mountain burn, or the lowing of cattle far down in the glen, or the mournful wail of a whaup. Below they see the ploughman in the fields, the white flock of sheep on the green hill-side, and on the banks of the silver river a lonely fisher; above lies a waste of rocks and heather, the home of the wild deer and the eagle, where

“Only the mightier movement sounds and passes:
Only winds and rivers,
Life and death”.

Thither they gladly bend their way, enjoying the light of the sun and the beauties of this delightful world. Through the heather, over the rocks—and at last they gain the summit. All round them stretch the hill-tops, some sloping gently to the sky, others looming up with frowning crags and dripping precipices. Here the sheen of a loch

through the pines; there the whiteness of falling water: near at hand a rocky corrie still specked with snow, further away the fertile fields of the lowlands; and away in the dim distance, where earth and heavens meet, a yellow strip of sand, and then the grey sea.

Some indeed at such a moment might wish for the power to see further and better, to catch a glimpse of the trout rising on the loch, or the tanned faces of fishermen in their boats at sea. To me the scene is quite satisfactory. In seed-time or in harvest, in summer or winter, the eye exults in an equally charming prospect. Here men are able to commune with Nature, and to receive the undefinable bliss that Nature bestows upon them that love her. Such blessings they receive. Do they pay nothing in return? Alas! we read of continual accidents, of a slip of the foot, of a stone giving way, and, without a moment's warning, a fall, a cry, and then silence. Is it Nature, then, that we must blame for these deaths? Does she exact such a terrible penalty?

The reason is to be found, rather, in the nature of man. The spirit to do something, to accomplish something, lies deep in the human heart: and surely this spirit and the deeds that it inspires serve to refute in a great measure the arguments of those unhappy critics who tell us that men have degenerated physically and morally. Of this spirit are heroes made; to this spirit Scotsmen and Englishmen owe a great part of their success; and however some may blame those daring and dauntless climbers who, in attempting to storm the castle walls of Nature, lose limb or life, of such men thoughtful minds cannot but feel proud. In the hills, as on the sea, one learns to look death in the face. The lovers of hill scenery are in the vast majority of cases men serious, yet genial, men who appreciate and love the beauty of this world, and yet do not fear to leave it. As Wordsworth says—

“The thought of death sits easy on the man
Who has been born and dies among the mountains”.

The hills indeed bear testimony that the race of man is still sturdy, that his blood still runs strong. And to the

few young men who censure those fighters with Nature, Matthew Arnold's lines may well be commended—

“While the locks are yet brown on thy head,
While the soul still looks through thine eyes,
While the heart still pours
The mantling blood to thy cheek,
Sink, O Youth, in thy soul!
Yearn to the greatness of Nature”.

Man, it has been said, is craving continually for what is good. Therefore by the beautiful world around us we are chastened and purified, sometimes, it may be, unconsciously. And this purifying and elevating power is to be found nowhere more strong than in the glens or green recesses of the hills. There, indeed, men find

“In Nature and the language of the sense
The anchor of their purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of their heart, and soul
Of all their moral being”.

Even when afar off one looks upon the hills towering into heaven, coloured now with the blush of heather, now with the ruddy tint of snow on a winter evening, with their shapely outlines clear against a red autumn sky, or dimly seen through drifting mist, even afar off one is filled with “thoughts that lie too deep for tears”—with thoughts such as filled the mind of Coleridge as he gazed on the mighty slope of Mont Blanc, moulding in his mind the Miltonian music of “The Hymn before Sunrise in the Vale of Chamouni”—

“O dread and silent Mount! I gazed on thee
Till thou, still present to the bodily sense,
Didst vanish from my thought; entranced in prayer
I worshipped the Invisible alone.
Awake, my soul! not only passive praise
Thou owest! not alone these swelling tears,
Mute thanks, and secret ecstasy. Awake,
Voice of sweet song! Awake, my heart, awake!
Green vales and icy cliffs, all join my hymn.

“Thou, too, hoar Mount, with thy sky-pointing peaks,
Thou kingly spirit throned among the hills,
Thou dread ambassador from Earth to Heaven,
Great hierarch! tell thou the silent sky,
And tell the stars, and tell yon rising sun,
Earth, with her thousand voices, praises God”. H. S.