

AMIDST THE SNOWS OF THE GRAMPIANS.

BY SETON P. GORDON.

MOUNT KEEN lies about forty miles west-south-west of Aberdeen, and, although of no mean altitude, is comparatively easy of ascent in winter. It is remarkably free from crevasses, swamps, and like dangers, while there is little risk of accident should a mist suddenly envelop the mountain, provided the mountaineer keeps well to the west side; but facing the north-east there is an almost perpendicular slope which presents a very treacherous surface when covered with frozen snow.

Accompanied by a friend, the writer arrived shortly before Christmas at Aboyne, from which the ascent is usually attempted; but from Christmas Eve onwards it either snowed or rained almost without cessation, and we were giving up all hope of a favourable climb, when on 8th January the weather at last showed signs of improving. The next day dawned very promisingly, with a sharp touch of frost in the air and an almost cloudless sky, and so we decided to risk the climb.

The base of Mount Keen being nearly twelve miles from Aboyne, how to reach it was rather a problem, as a twelve-mile cycle ride is not quite the best preparation for climbing a mountain. At length, however, the difficulty was solved by my doing the distance on my motor cycle, and towing my friend behind by means of a rope attached to my saddle-pillar. As the roads were in places very rutty, the ruts being rendered as hard as iron by the night's frost, the ride was a somewhat eventful one, but after several narrow shaves—my friend at one place running right off the road into the heather—we eventually reached our destination about noon, and after a short rest commenced the ascent.

There was no snow on the low grounds, but Mount Keen was deeply shrouded in white, and the snow-line was reached shortly after the start. It turned out that we had chosen a very favourable day, as, owing to the

severe frost, the snow had become so hard that it was possible to walk on the crust, just as one would walk on ice. We had not gone far ere the wind increased to a gale from the west, and it became no easy matter to progress against it—the “spindrift” being blown past us in clouds.

At length, after a stiff climb, the summit cairn (3077 feet) was reached, and we were rewarded by a magnificent view. To the east the sea was visible from the north of Aberdeen to Montrose, while trains were plainly discerned on the Caledonian Railway at least twenty-five miles



CAIRN OF MOUNT KEEN.

distant. We also noticed houses, which, if not actually Aberdeen itself, must have been very near to it. To the north the view extended right away to Knock Hill at Glen Barry, Buck of the Cabrach, and the Bin Hill of Cullen, the latter about sixty miles distant, and also the Tap o' Noth, at Gartly, while just across the valley of the Dee Morven looked very insignificant from our standpoint; westward, Lochnagar stood out prominently, its

summit being at times just touched by the clouds. We also caught fleeting glimpses of Ben Avon and Beinn a' Bhuid. To the west, however, the view was not so clear, as every now and again the higher mountain tops were shrouded in heavy snow clouds.

At length we bethought ourselves of our sandwiches, and made a hasty meal, although it was rather chilly work—a thermometer placed on the snow registering 22° Fahrenheit, or 10° below freezing point.

All the stones of the cairn were plastered with frozen snow and ice to the depth of fully half-a-foot, and great care had to be exercised, as the drifted snow had covered over all the crevices between the boulders around the cairn.

The descent was just about to be commenced when two magnificent golden eagles, probably male and female, came soaring over us with outstretched wings, in the very teeth of the gale. They were evidently on the keen lookout for some luckless ptarmigan or mountain hare, and sailed right over our heads without apparently deigning to notice us, being soon lost on the sky line. Although flying dead against the gale, their wings were practically motionless, the only movement being an occasional slight quiver as if to steady themselves.

Standing still, however, at a temperature of 22° F., with an icy wind sweeping down from the snow-clad mountains to the west, is not very pleasant, and so the descent was commenced. Taking a somewhat more circuitous route, we struck due west, and after about half-an-hour's walk turned abruptly to the north—in which direction lay the base and our cycles.

By the time the base was reached darkness had begun to fall, so we made all haste to mount our cycles, as a twelve-mile run over a practically unknown road, with treacherous frozen ruts about a foot deep, was not a very enjoyable outlook. A last glance at Mount Keen showed that we had been very fortunate, as ominous dark clouds were scurrying up and were already enveloping the summit. An hour's ride brought us once more to Aboyne, the lights of which seemed to welcome us back to civilisation.