

## AMONG THE HILLS IN MAY.

By REV. D. C. MACKAY.

TAKING a ramble through Strathglass and Glencannich towards the end of May, I marked how deeply the spring had imprinted its track on the hills. From a distance little of this change could be recognised. No doubt the spotless whiteness of the night-dress worn in winter sleep had been replaced by the more sombre hues of the ordinary garments of the hills; no doubt too the coming viridescence could be seen, even afar off, where fledgling birches struggled up the slopes. But it required a closer inspection to reveal the more intimate touch of spring on every little knoll and hillock. One has to go there to see the dainty violet sunning itself, with clusters of "cat's-paws" and wild thyme on the bare spots of grass. The heather itself, though the bloom is still far off, already tells that the sap is circulating in its veins again, for the tender twigs about the roots are fresher and greener than when they languished under the snow. St. John's wort is already bright and full, hoisting itself up on a still longer stem where the heather is deeper so as to obtain an unobstructed view of the sun.

It is not long since the deer might be seen in dreary files on the snow, not from choice but from the necessity of seeking fresh pasture; but now they may be seen, not hurrying over it, but lingering fondly on the white patches far up the hills to cool their heated hoofs. But it cannot be said that the deer are particularly interesting in the month of May. The hinds are heavy with calf, and the stags are mostly shorn of the glory of their "beamed frontlet". The antlers are generally shed in the month of April, but before the end of May the new horns have already attained a considerable size.

A stroll through the hills, especially in Glencannich, discloses other less pleasing indications of the spring, for

the vipers and slow-worms, so strongly represented in this district, are now abroad, and may be met with, basking in the sun on grassy hillocks and even crawling along the public roads. An old native tells me that the dangerous viper may be easily recognised by the mark of the "V". As I take no undue interest in the study of ophiology I am taking his word for it, and perhaps the reader who has a care for his comfort would be well advised to follow my example in this point, and leave the experimental test to the specialist. The "V" very appropriately designates the viper, villainous, vicious, vindictive, virulent, venomous, v . . . v . . . v . . . *ad lib.* Anyone may exercise his ingenuity by filling up the spaces, which reminds me of the trick of which I was wont to suspect Cicero in my school days, as he seemed to be fond of throwing in an "&c." only when he had exhausted all the stock of indeclinable nouns and irregular verbs that he could conjure up in support of his plea. Cases are reported in these glens, where the bite of a viper has been fraught with serious consequences, though it is seldom, if ever, fatal to a strong, healthy person. Still, when you meet a viper it is well not to caress it too familiarly, or to cherish it too tenderly when you find one "almost frozen to death".

It is surprising how susceptible the hills are to the changes of the seasons, and how eloquent their expressions are to those who can read them aright. They are a perpetual poem, changing with the changing year. Look at them in the winter time huddled up in their white furs—monuments of resignation—waiting, with the patience begotten of secular antiquity, for the coming of the summer which they love so well. Watch them again in the autumn when the splendour of their vesture is fading. They are still rich and beautiful, though subdued in their sepia, old-gold, and olive hues. In the autumn especially the hills form a sympathetic background for the play of the elements, now showing the perspiration of the labouring blast in ripples and swathes along their slopes, now toning and softening the cold glint of an October sun. And when the thunder comes, how grandly the electric

organ of the heavens reverberates in the wilderness of their crags, and gorges, and corries!

The chief glory of most of our Scottish hills is, undoubtedly, their gorgeous display of heather blossom, rolling away in undulating miles of purple glory. This is at its best in the early autumn; but at the time when the spring and the summer meet on the hills their beauty is richer in variety and detail. Then it is not merely one tone that prevails—it is not a solo that the hills are singing then—but a full, exuberant chorus, for every peeping bud, every tuft of moss, and every trickling rill has its own little ripple of gladness. The wild birds, too, in the profusion of their renewed vitality, make the moors vocal with many a mingled shout of joy. The red grouse are nesting, and often startle the solitary intruder with their sudden quack and whirr as they dart from the heather at his feet. On the higher reaches the ptarmigan is to be found, also absorbed in family cares. In order the better to adapt itself to its background, it has come nearer to its red brother in appearance by assuming its summer dress. The white hare also has now followed the change of shade in its native hills. It is well for these creatures which inhabit the heights that nature has furnished them with this wonderful means of evading detection on the part of their ever watchful foes. At this season particularly there are greedy eyes scanning every acre of the hills from morning till night, for the eagle, and the fox have also hungry broods eagerly awaiting, in their wild eyries and cairns, the return of their parents with the daily booty, and it needs all the delicacy of nature's brush to paint its defenceless children so as to deceive the eye of the eagle. Though the fox does not command the same wide range as the bird of prey in its airy height, still it could not by any means be called short-sighted. Again it is well compensated for any restriction in the limits of its horizon by the extraordinary keenness of its sense of smell. A gamekeeper lately told me of a recent experience where an eagle and a fox were both led on to meet their death by their predominating senses. He saw an eagle swoop

down, apparently from the bounds of heavenward space, on the fresh carcase of a hind. By a rapid stalk he was soon within range and secured his prize as it rose. He had not gone far when he spied, in the distance, a fox coming up wind towards the same spot with its nose in the air. Swiftly and stealthily he took up his position for a good shot, at the same time taking due care to avoid the zone of wind that would have betrayed his presence to the fox. With undeviating precision reynard drew on to his anticipated booty, but alas! the gamekeeper's gun was endowed with equal precision, and suddenly interrupted the poor fox in its expectations. Those who are much among the hills at this time have opportunities of witnessing many an interesting sight begotten of the complexity of desires and impulses which move the inhabitants of those remote haunts of nature.

Unquestionably the hills have a wonderful fascination in the spring and the early summer, but, spring, summer, autumn or winter, they have an enduring charm which is all their own—which can be adequately appreciated only in their midst, but which appeals deeply even to the tamest heart once they have allured it far from the dull prose and the artificiality of mercenary men.