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CORGARFF AND ITS HILLS IN WINTER.

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LYING at the head of the Don, Corgarff, "The Rough Corrie," is one of the wildest and most desolate spots in Aberdeenshire, and few districts in this country have a heavier fall of snow during the winter months. Last January a friend and I motored across from Aboyne to the Allargue Arms, a most comfortable and cheery hotel, where, during our stay, we received every kindness and consideration at the hands of genial Mr. Morrison, the proprietor. We had spent two days here before Christmas, but rashly motoring over to Aboyne on Christmas day, were unable to get back again till January 12th, on account of the roads being completely blocked by the terrific blizzard that commenced immediately after our departure. The first week of January, however, brought with it soft winds from the Atlantic, and when we left Aboyne on the morning of Saturday the 12th, the snow there had practically all disappeared. Our troubles began on the Birkhill at Tillypronie, as snow and ice still thickly covered the road here, and the wheels of the car refused to bite on the slippery surface. At length, however, with the help of two men pushing hard behind, the summit point of the road (1,200 ft.) was safely gained. But here the going was worse than ever, as the wreaths had not as yet been cut, and we had almost given up the idea of proceeding any further, when a party of sturdy roadmen appeared on the scene, and with

the aid of these men and the keeper who lives on the hill-top—at one time six men were pushing their hardest behind the car—we got safely through without any mishap. A country grocer going on his rounds was unfortunately kept back at each drift until the car got through it, and his language towards the close was scarcely complimentary, but under the circumstances we readily forgave him, although whether he experienced any forgiving sentiment towards us is extremely doubtful. Once the main Donside road was gained, the rest of the journey was comparatively easy, as the drifts were not serious until near our destination, and even here they had been cut some time before. After a good night's rest, we set out next morning for Meikle Corr Riabhaich (2553 ft.) which stands on the right hand side of the road crossing to Tomintoul, about four miles north of Corgarff. From the hotel, for quite half a mile onwards, a succession of immense snow-wreaths lay across the road, some of them quite 10 ft. in depth, and the larchwood was almost buried in the snow. Keeping the road until the highest point (2,090 ft.) was reached—which by the way, is on the boundary between Aberdeenshire and Banffshire—we struck off to the right, and began the climb. From the road, the summit is easily gained, but to the south of the Cairn we came upon a magnificent glissade—steep, with snow in first-class order, and here we spent some time. In the corrie we found a great number of grouse and a few white hares sheltering from the keen west wind, and these seemed surprised indeed at our sudden appearance. About an inch of fresh snow had fallen over night, and while it made the surface softer “going,” completely blinded us as we glissaded down, forcing us to shut our eyes, and let ourselves go, trusting mainly to luck. Near the end of the run was an almost precipitous descent of a few feet, and this added a great excitement to the glissade. The sun was shining brilliantly as we lunched in the shelter of the corrie, and the snow was giving off a dazzling light. We noticed that at one point there had been a slight avalanche, and large blocks of snow had become detached from an overhanging cornice. The cairn of Meikle Corr Riabhaich is very loosely constructed

and as we sheltered behind it, we could hear the wind moaning and whistling through the stones, although little or no draught was felt where we stood. Although the weather was rather hazy, we had an excellent view of all the surrounding hills. Southward, Lochnagar, Mount Keen and Morven stood out clearly, and east, the Buck of the Cabrach was very distinct. Westwards the Cairngorms were visible, though slight snow showers and mist rather obscured the view in this direction. We have remarked how often Ben Muich Dhui is mist capped, while further east Ben Avon is usually quite free of cloud, the explanation being that Braeriach and Ben Muich Dhui catch any mist coming from the west, and thus Ben Avon usually escapes; especially is this the case during the winter months. To the north-west, the Speyside hills carried a good many large snow drifts, but it was noticed that not even the Cairngorms had a continuous coating of snow. Striking north from the cairn, we made for the Ironstone Mine—now fallen into disuse—which is situated near the source of the Conglass Water, disturbing on our way great numbers of grouse. As we rested awhile amongst the heather, admiring the view to the westwards, a pair of golden eagles came along the hillside straight towards us, and the hen bird had got within a dozen yards of us, when, suddenly perceiving our motionless forms, she soared abruptly skywards, the rush of the air through their wings being clearly heard. The grouse were mad with fear, and were flying about in an aimless fashion, having seemingly quite lost their heads, but the eagles paid not the slightest attention to them, and, sailing on, were soon lost to view. Near the disused mine, we came upon a grouse's egg lying in the heather beside a stone, where a hoodie crow or some other marauder had evidently carried it during the nesting season, as the mark of his beak was plainly seen on the shell. The astonishing part of the find was the fact that the egg was still intact, and with the spots and blotches only slightly faded, notwithstanding the severe frost and snow that had lately been experienced on the hill. We surmised that the egg-stealer had been driven off before he had time to suck his prize, as the remains of a second egg in the

vicinity pointed to the stone being a favourite rendezvous of the plunderer. In one of the disused shafts of the mine we found a white hare sheltering, which on our approach set off up the hillside at a tremendous speed, and we could not help envying its agility. From the mine, the source of the Nocht water, which joins the Don at Bellabeg, is only a mile or so distant in an easterly direction, but as the sun had already disappeared, we made for the Tomintoul road, and returned to Corgarff. A pair of snow buntings was disturbed at the edge of the Conglass Water, and made a charming picture as they flew backwards and forwards over our heads, as though loth to leave the spot, and then, calling faintly to each other, set off towards the east, the sunset tinging their snow white plumage a delicate pink. Regaining the road, we found it for the most part covered with deep wreaths, hard enough, as a rule, to bear our weight, but rendering all vehicular traffic of any sort quite out of the question, although we noticed that at least one man and a horse had crossed since the storm. We heard at the hotel that no vehicle of any description had crossed to or from Tomintoul since November, but that a joiner at Tomintoul was endeavouring to have the road cut in order that his carts could cross to Corgarff; so far, however, the road authorities had taken no action. Certainly it appeared to us a Herculean labour to clear the road of the snow, and quite impracticable unless a whole army of men were employed, although on certain days many of the wreaths would easily bear the weight of a horse and cart. As darkness was gathering, a grouse was seen to settle on the heather where evidently a golden eagle was resting, unnoticed by the intruder, as the king of birds immediately dashed out at the unfortunate grouse, but, fortunately for the latter, missed his mark and seemed to strike heavily against the hillside. Then he began to rise, ascending in spirals with hardly a motion of the wing, and seemed to look with disdain on the coveys of affrighted grouse that were flying frantically over the place. His mate soon appeared on the scene, and, although there was a strong head wind, came soaring towards us at a great speed, with wings bent well back, so as to offer as little resistance

as possible to the wind. The haze of the day had now completely cleared off, and Ben Avon stood out darkly against the brilliant sunset. The grouse were crowing loudly on every side, as though thankful for the recent escape, and the white hares were our companions until we had almost reached the hotel.

Another delightful expedition was the ascent of Cairn Culchavie (2385 feet) which lies just beyond Delnadamp to the south of the Don. Our car took us as far as Inchmore, the last habitation on the valley of the Don, and from here the summit appeared to be very easily gained. It was soon found, however, that appearances were in this case very deceptive, as when the skyline was reached, we found the summit still beyond us, and this occurred more than once, so that ere the real top was ultimately reached, darkness had begun to fall. An exceedingly fine view was obtained of Ben Avon, on which deep snow fields were lying, and the Avon was seen flowing rapidly down by Inchrory. Ben Rinnes to the northward stood out very prominently, and eastward Bennachie was dimly seen through the haze. Morven and the Brown Cow were also clearly seen, but what most caught the eye was the beautiful sunset effect to the south-west, where the sky was lit up with a beautiful pinkish tinge, changing, as darkness came on, to a delicate green. Frost was now setting in, and the pools of water on the hill were rapidly being covered with a thin film of ice, although the air still seemed to us to be soft and mild. The Inchrory deer fence crosses Cairn Culchavie's summit, and we kept alongside of this for the first part of the descent. On the north-eastern face of the hill was an extensive snow field, seemingly offering splendid facilities for a glissade, but to our disappointment we found that the surface of the snow was just too soft for this form of sport, so we had to get down the snow field as well as possible, every now and again sinking deep into the snow. At length, however, the path from Inchrory to Delnadamp was struck, and soon the car was reached. By this time it was quite dark, and we noticed in the distance an astonished keeper and his friend gazing at the motor in a dazed fashion, as though wondering what in the world it was

doing there at that time of year. The run back to the Allargue Arms had to be undertaken with a good deal of caution, as deep snow wreaths still lay half-way across the road, and the latter was in a terrible state, what with the melting snow, and frost and thaw alternating. The weather fortunately remained delightful, and it was resolved that a walk to Inchrory should be the next expedition. After exploring the Castle of Corgarff during the morning, over which we were most kindly shewn by the inmates, we again took the car to Inchmore, and walked across to Avonside. A very hard frost prevailed, with a piercing west wind, but the sun shone brightly, although the air was rather hazy, especially to the east. A thick sheet of marvellously smooth and clear black ice covered every pool, and even the streams themselves were partly frozen over. Soon after entering the forest of Glenavon, the Don crosses the path, here a tiny stream within about half a mile from its source on Cairn Culchavie. The water at a first glance seems to fall into the Avon, but by winding about ultimately flows eastwards towards Aberdeen and the coast. A herd of deer was noticed grazing near the source, and their footmarks were seen on the surface of the frozen snow. A cloud was resting on the summit of Ben Muich Dhui, and apparently light snow was falling on the hill. Ben Avon, however, stood out very sharply, and from the height above Inchrory Lodge, the Avon, with the Ben in the back-ground, made a very fine picture in the fast fading light of the winter's afternoon. A large flock of linnets and bramblings was flitting restlessly about in the field bordering the Avon, but bird life at this time of year is not at all common at this elevation, although during our walk across we had the hardy red grouse as our companions. At more than one point we noticed very large stacks of peat that had been built up at the roadside for the use of the crofters. As we were returning, we met, about half way across, a man hurrying in the direction of Inchrory. He had, he said, come across from Tomintoul *via* Cockbridge that morning begging for rabbit skins—he was a butcher down in his luck he told us—and was returning as fast as possible, hoping to reach Tomintoul before dark. He

was utterly unfamiliar with the road, and we could not help pitying his long walk down Avonside ere he reached his destination.

Looking back towards Ben Avon, we noticed a dark stormy looking cloud coming up from the south-west. Evidently there were two wind currents at work, as the cloud was swirling about in an extraordinary manner, and was taking on all kinds of shapes—the most common being that of a horse prancing on its rear legs. It was conjectured that this might be the sign of stormy weather, but fortunately these fears proved groundless, and next day we were enabled to make the ascent of Ben à Chruinnach (2,536 ft.) under very favourable conditions. We had barely left the hotel before we noticed the grouse flying aimlessly in all directions, and soon a golden eagle came into view, soaring majestically overhead and causing great terror in grouseland. The king of birds, however, took no notice of the terrified grouse, and made as if to cross over by the Tornahaish hill to Gairnside, but changing his mind he turned west again and passed right overhead, making apparently for Avonside. We kept the Tomintoul road as far as the watershed, and here found a grouse newly eaten by probably the same eagle as we had just seen. The bird had been killed only a very short time, and had been picked very clean indeed, while all around the road was strewn with the luckless victim's feathers. From the summit of the road to the hill top is a rise of only some 500 feet, but walking was made difficult by the hardness of the snow, and one was very apt to slide down backwards, unless each footstep was dug out before-hand. Although the grouse had mostly paired on the lower ground, here they were still in large packs, and the appearance of an eagle coming across from Meikle Corr Riabhach caused a temporary panic. Quite a number of white hares were put up, and were for the most part fairly fearless. From the summit cairn on a clear day a very fine view of the Cairngorms is obtained, but unfortunately the weather to the west was rather hazy, and so the hills were only partly visible. We made out the village of Tomintoul, and beyond, the hills of the Spey valley, but towards Morven the weather

appeared threatening, and Morven itself was half shrouded in mist. We had a splendid glissade down the south-east side of the hill, a huge snow field some 200 yards long and quite 30 feet deep having been piled up here by the northern blizzard. A slight "fresh" had set in, but nevertheless the going was quite fast enough, in fact rather too fast in places, where the gradient was about one in two. Striking the road about a mile above the hotel, we watched the glorious sunset for some time, and thought with pleasure on our delightful outing on the lone Donside mountains.