

## A WINTER WEEK-END AT THE DERRY.

BY REV. R. M. CAIRNEY.

AN unexpected chance gave me a week-end free. I said, "I will spend it among the hills, in their mid-winter garment of snow!" With enthusiasm in my breast and knapsack on my back, and otherwise suitably accoutred, I set off by the first Deeside train and motor for Braemar and the Cairngorms.

I found Braemar regal in snow, and grander even than Braemar in the autumn. After dinner I there parted with two wood-merchants who were going over the hills to buy trees, and stepped out alone for the Linn of Dee. How still the snow-wreathed road! How graceful the trees and shrubs, festooned with the white benison of the sky! How fair the prospect revealed through the skirting of trees! How grand the hills backed by the mountain peaks which cleave the clear sky with their shafts and hatchets of ice! Their apparent height is mightily increased by the black bare crags which show grimly on their sides through the snow. The air is crisp and compact of oxygen; and walking, though in pretty deep snow, is a luxury. As evening drew in, the tall firs and the ghostly moonlit rocks gave an eerie sensation. The "Gallows-tree" swung its gaunt, frost laden arms out into the dark, over the lip of the gravel pit. A solitary crow cawed its hoarse raven-cry; and not another sound but the roar of the river, between its ice-bound banks, disturbed the dark solitude of my walk. Suddenly there was a distant tinkle, tinkle, of bells. It rapidly increased, and quickly came two fine long-stepping horses, tandem, careering down the hill with the carrier's sledge behind. The pretty spirited beasts seemed to enjoy the sledge much better than the cart with its wheels and trams. Quickly, as it had come, the merry sound died away in front. As I plod on, the snow on the road becomes



deeper and less trodden, and the tramping proportionally more laborious. Out of Inverey, and into the open where the road and river touch each other gently, then sweep apart again as if still shy and perturbed by their excess of modesty, though brought together, first, miles ago, then up the little rising ground, then a dive into the dark trees, and, in a trice, I stand on the substantial bridge across the Dee, with a streak of moonlit clouds above me. The Linn forced its disputed way between and under masses of ice. A fine stag of ten points glided cautiously out from the trees twenty yards off.

My way now lies over untrodden snow save for the occasional cross tracks of deer. A yawning gap in the fence, about which splintered wood is scattered and the snow is trodden brown with the hoof-prints of deer, indicates a hungry rush out of their confines. Here and there patches of heather and moss, cleared of snow, and nibbled, mark their browsing places and beds. The wind blows cold and free now, and doubtless there are fresh layers of snow being laid thick on the moory tops of the hills. On the left bank of the Lui I find myself often plunged up to the thighs in the ditch-rans which are hidden beneath snow-wreaths, but these little accidents, in their own way, enliven the walk. Patches of bright red blood seem to indicate the trail of some fox, which, having killed its quarry, has dragged it along the path to its lair. Now I notice a small well-shaped footprint, armed with stout tackets, descending the glen. I put on my Sherlock Holmes spectacles and pronounce it the foot-print of a long-striding youth. I was "far-out"; it proved to be the foot-print of my intended host. One of true Keltic blood, he has, though no youth, a very small springy foot—just the thing for negotiating the hills. There is little other sign of life in the glen, for the deer have gone over the hill for shelter from the cold winds. One solitary rabbit darts into the pine-wood; two crows, one a good mile behind the other, pass over my head; and by and by, a hovering hawk, after I had watched it for five minutes, sailed out of sight over the hill brow.



The little burn from the hill-side has made a risky cascade of ice at the ford, so I cross at the wooden bridge a few paces lower down, where the larach of the cottage add desolation to loneliness. Just below this are two striking mounds in the river course, which must originally have stretched right across the river bed. They are doubtless the remnants of moraines left by the glacier which scoured this glen in the glacial epoch. They are composed of gravel and some small boulders from the hills farther up. A mile up the Lui from here, just at Derry Lodge, there is another in much better preservation. It rises behind the house, quite forty feet high, and is more than a hundred and fifty yards long, with what might be continuations of it up the eastern hill side for as much again. The western end is abruptly cut off, no doubt by the erosion of the river in torrent, and by frosts. A sprinkling of pines of small and rather feeble growth covers this moraine. Still beyond—up Glen Derry—there are several others. One, well-preserved, is about a quarter of a mile up; a larger one, called "the dam", about two miles in the same direction. Like archaic old world Highlanders, in the reign of the Georges, disputing every yard of every haugh and meadow, up the straths and glens, to resist the invasion of lowland civilisation and lowland rule and supremacy, these glacial moraines mark the stages of the retreat of the glaciers before the inevitable advance of the sunnier times under which the lowlands had already been long smiling. Thus found the "Ice-age" lingering refuge in the mountains, stretching down to the cold upland glens in many a retreating ice-flow.

Carn Crom, shadowy white and speckled in the pale moonlight, and above it the conical peak of Cairngorm of Derry, show like celestial spectres; Carn a'Mhaim stands massive. The clouds have driven past; the sky is clear and the air sharp with keen frost; the wind has quite fallen; the moon is lambent with brilliance; the stars, despite her, are gleaming in their thousands with that peculiar brilliance which a frosty night



gives them. Venus, shining like a moon herself, was just about to set. So clear was the sky that I could, for a short time, make her rise and set at will, by just walking up or down the hill-side. A beautiful object she was—a great limpid eye glancing over the edge of the hills. Not far above her shone Saturn, and a little higher in the heavens, Mars flamed red. When I climbed up to the “lift” I found Jupiter forcing his steady light through the horizon haze in the east. Thus I had the rare fortune to have our four brightest planets in sight at once. A few more plunges in the deep snow brought me to the door of the cosy lodge, where I received a warm and hearty welcome. The evening was spent in music, in friendly chats, and in skimming over John Sobieski Stuart’s Notes on the “Lays of the Deer Forest.”

I rose betimes in the dark frosty morning and had a brisk walk before breakfast; and, after that important function, had leisurely worship with the family. How sweet is the Book and the time of communion when there is no feeling of hurry to mar it! As it was impossible to go to Church, and it was too cold to keep healthily warm sitting by the fire, I took my staff and deliberately exceeded the “Sabbath day’s journey” in a good climb up Carn Crom, with my pocket Bible in my breast. I was richly rewarded. Beginning my walk in the mood of a wanderer, I struck off away from the path and the foot-bridge, and had to cross the Derry by the help of a big pine that had fallen partially across it. I did this straddle-legged, as the coating of ice upon the tree trunk made it risky to attempt the Blondin step. Had I been quite sure of the river ice I might easily have leapt the water in the mid-stream, so narrow was it. The climbing over the dry snow was delightful, and only where the surface had been melted and frozen into ice, and where the live rock broke through, had I to betake myself to the undignified method of hands and knees and toe-points. As I climbed, the day steadily improved till all the sky was clear save where the creeping clouds clung around the top of Monadh Mor, Braeriach and Ben Muich Dhui.



Northward, Cairngorm of Derry shone white as a celestial throne, and hid Beinn Mheadhoin. Eastward, Beinn Bhreac presented an unbroken surface of white. Behind and further east Beinn a' Bhuird raised his mighty shoulders, his white mantle dotted with grey clochs. Far off Lochnagar lifted his head sharp and well defined, but not so white as the Cairngorms. Away south lay the glen and its ice-banked river, and over the lift the wooded south bank of the Dee at Inverey carried the eye up Glen Ey and over its Socach to the rounded summit of Glas Maol. Westward, Monadh Mor and its sheer crags led on to the top of the fierce precipices of the Devil's Point and the solid mass of Cairn Toul. It was a view to inspire the loftiest feelings, aye and the most sacred; for was not all clothed in that wonderful spotless garment that can come only from the heavens—type of the pure robe of righteousness, given, a free gift, of the grace of Heaven, to all men of good heart. Down below me the little forest of pines that protected the stalkers' cottages in this arctic winter looked snug amid the cold white mountains; and, as I looked, I thought that the kindly ingenious inmates therein were of more interest to the Father which is in Heaven, than all the mass of towering crags, cold and dead.

The glacial moraine already referred to, behind the lodge, forms a splendid look-out place and promenade, like the deck of an Atlantic liner. The view from it, too, is magnificent. Hither I came to sit and read in the gloaming, and, when cold, to promenade. Coming down I met a stag with only one horn, who seemed quite willing to have a chat with me. When I made my approaches, however, he began to lower that same one horn, and I glided quietly off towards the house. I was told that he was the most impudent beast in the forest, kept prowling about the house, apart from the rest, tried to enter by the doors, but would allow no approach to familiarity. The lady of the house had several times been threatened by him, and wished he might get shot in mistake for a hind.

My host having returned from Church, stories of wonderful events on the hills, of pleasant meetings with



well-known public men as well as aristocrats and royalty, affecting tales of exhaustion and mist-shrouded wanderings, interspersed with many an interesting fact about deer, made the time pass very fast. Nor were there wanting some shrewd moralizings, and uplifting meditations upon the Creator's handwork and the duties and privileges of the creature. The crunching of the one-horned stag's hoofs on the hard snow outside, and the whistling of the keen wind through the window sash, which I several times thought was the distant sound of bag-pipes—so mournfully musical was it—were the accompaniments to our reading the chapters before retiring for the night, after one of the pleasantest days of my life.

Refreshed in body and mind alike, I rose again betimes and wandered out, superfluously, to seek an appetite that I already had for breakfast. I seemed to hear the cheery chirp of the snow bunting, and was informed that it is often seen about the lodge in the winter. Reluctantly I must, this morning, bid farewell to the sweet solitudes and the Highland hospitality of the glen. My good host has three convoys which he gives to his guests, and each one implies a different "good-bye." To see a guest to the end of the lodge avenue is to treat him with just every-day common courtesy, as one who knows he is welcome and need not be fussed over. To go on with him to the point where the road rises to a view down the length of the glen (about half a mile), is to treat him in a special manner and indicate that a future visit would be very welcome, and is the convoy a new acquaintance gets if he has proved himself an agreeable guest. But to see a man as far as the burn, and to put him across it, is to see him so far that there is no fear of his returning, and to indicate quite plainly that he is not wanted back! When my host came beyond his own private road I suggested, having regard to his advancing years, that he had come far enough. "Nay," he said, "I am going to give you my best convoy, to yon hillock there, for I want you to feel that you will be very welcome to come back when you can." Down the glen I wended my way in the



stillness of the frosty morning. Up the glen shone the morning sun through the faint morning haze. The two moraines break the level of the haugh, and loom out, like fairy islands, from the delicate sun-bathed haze; the deer are down on the ice in scores to get at the water that flows in the narrow run in the centre; the sky above is blue, and the only sound is the crunch, crunch, of my hill-boots in the hard snow. It is a scene for a Turner to paint. I stoop to pick up a film of the medullary sheath of the pine tree, which some stag had been feeding on, and hold it up to let the sun shine through it, in colours amber and pink and brown, and lo! there is a stampede of the deer from the river bank up the hill—my movement has caught their eye and aroused their suspicions.

My walk was brisk, for the frosty air was exhilarating, and I soon reached the Fife Arms. Morrone, the pride of Braemar, looked well enough to-day for all the best things that have been said of him. A cap of solid white and a dash of snow down the crags do remarkably heighten the appearance of a bold hill. I waved a reluctant farewell to it, and to fair friends in Braemar; the motor ground its noisy way out; and I saw no more of Nature, save the auspicious sight of a splendid Magpie, until "Aberdeen awa'" was reached.