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A-WHEEL THROUGH THE HILLS IN WINTER.

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THE reader who has neglected to keep a careful meteorological diary may find it difficult to credit the statement that we had three fine days last January. Nevertheless, it is so, and they fell on a certain Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. On the last of these memorable days I found myself "in the wilds of far Kintail" supported by a bicycle, whereas I was due in Cannich, Strathglass, on the following Saturday. The distance between the two places is about thirty-five miles—that is, on a computation about as rough as the road. I had originally intended leaving Kintail on the Saturday morning, but as Thursday turned out rather disappointing I re-adjusted my programme, and, in spite of the kindly advice of my host, I decided to start on the morrow at the break of day. Friends (?) advised me to put off until Saturday, and if the day proved unpropitious, I could then go round by road and rail! Ye who have seen the Stromeferry road, or who can see it even in contour, consider that this was seriously proposed as the first step in an alternative which was supposed to be pleasant compared with a journey "over the hills." After ten miles of this road I was to be allowed to rest over three hours in the train while it strolled along over sixty-three miles, mostly moorland. After that I should have only seventeen miles

on the Strathglass road to reach my destination—and the strath is so rugged and grand that it is impossible to dodge the scenery even on the high road itself. That night the snow appeared, and I told my host to “call me early.” When I woke next morning I had not been called and it was not early, though I found that my hospitable entertainer had been astir for some time. He told me that he did not mean to be a party to the folly of attempting to cross such hills in a winter storm. Though grateful (more or less) for his well-meant advice, I had known those hills under various aspects, and knew well where to lie low and evade their inclemency in case of special pressure, so I dressed, fed, and packed up, and then discovered that my kind adviser could not even see me off the premises as he had been suddenly commandeered by duty. However, I knew the ropes, but unfortunately I was disappointed in getting the boat on which I had counted to put me across the loch that rolled between me and my road. But in Kintail, where every man is ready to oblige and every second man has a boat, that was a small matter. I went to a likely cottage, knocked and hailed the inmates. The answer came back in strong Gaelic, “Get up, get up, there’s a gentleman at the door.” Two other doors were tried with similar results as far as expedition went, and before I had eventually contrived to get afloat I had the mortification to see my first-intended boatman parading afar by the shore.

The morning was not pleasant or promising. A strong rain-laden breeze from the west seized the crests of the ebbing waves and flung the spray unkindly in our faces as we rowed. Still the wind *was* from the west, and I was going to the east. Notwithstanding wind and wave we reached the further shore—the boatman turned his prow for home and the abandoned cyclist made for the hills in the grasp of the gale. For twelve miles at least there was a road which, though deteriorating mile by mile, still made cycling possible especially with such a power behind. In Killilan, where hills, whose nomenclature

entails an indiscriminate abuse of the alphabet, rise sheer on every side to a height of over 2,000 feet, the whole force of the storm seemed to be concentrated into the narrow glen of the Elchaig. The perspiration of the labouring blast showed in swathes and ripples against the green hillsides, but undismayed the bicycle swished along. With increasing elevation sleet appeared instead of rain, and it was high time to have rest and refreshment with kind friends at the Iron Lodge. On emerging after an hour under the kindly roof, the scene was white instead of green. Here, too, began the crux of the journey. At the famous Sgaird-lair the track rises more than 500 feet within a mile. Here there is no chance even of wheeling the bicycle, so angular and narrow is the path as it winds round bank and boulder, twisting and zigging and zagging and sometimes splitting in two in a vain endeavour to disguise the terrible steepness of the ascent. But with shoulder to wheel, all went well, especially as a strong shoulder had been lent for the occasion. The wind was now furiously belabouring us with a shower of miniature snow-balls. So furious grew the storm as we mounted, that we were fain to take shelter behind a triangular rock to await a mitigation. Nothing could be seen but the tearing drift of snow-flakes as the wind roared through the clefts of the corries. When the worst of this fury had been spent we resumed our way, and found that a number of stricken hinds had been seeking shelter around the corner of our friendly rock. Our path, faint enough even in open weather, was now no longer to be seen, but the day was brighter, and the lie of the land was sufficient guidance as to our general direction. He of the strong shoulder accompanied me still a few miles more over the wild and dreary watershed, and saw me safe across the Amhainn Sithidh, one of the head waters of the Cannich. From the other side he waved me farewell, and turned his face to the blast. By crossing this stream I got a much better path, leading from Benula Lodge to the west end of the forest. It had now been fair for some

time, but the snow was deep enough on the path to conceal all its asperities of surface. Here I made the agreeable discovery that there were others out in these wilds, for there on the path was a very recent track of a man and a horse. I assumed that they had gone after hinds, as the track went hillwards, in the direction opposite to mine. Here the undulations and the sinuosities of the path were often of a very pronounced description, as is the way with those bridle-paths on the hills, but I was able to ride most of the descents and parts of what might, on account of the contrast, have been mistaken for levels. This mode of progress was a little faster than walking; it also afforded a considerable amount of sport, sometimes threatening to break many more things than the monotony of the way. I had always to be on the alert, ready to spring off on the shortest notice where a frost-loosened boulder had rolled down and blocked the way, or where a merry streamlet went dashing through the path. Fortunately the bicycle was specially built in view of such experiences, and seemed on the whole to enjoy it as much as its rider. As I rode and hopped and walked along in this manner, I amused myself with a little practice *à la* Sherlock Holmes with regard to those who had gone to the hills. Thus I soon discovered that there were two men, one rather oldish who had taken to the saddle on attacking the steeper ground. As he rode, the old man carried a small rifle slung over his shoulder and a walking stick in his hand. As they rounded a bend in the path he had stopped his pony for a bit, while his companion spied at a few deer away up under a rock. There was nothing warrantable among them, however, and our friends went on, eventually scaring the deer as they were now nowhere to be seen. One of the men was a smoker, but he had lost the lid of his pipe shortly before; he also wore a full beard. At all events such were my findings from the following data: The age was betrayed by the step before the rider mounted, and by the fact that two rifles and two sticks were set against the bank while the

younger man went round to the other side of the pony, evidently to hold the stirrup—all this being revealed by the eloquent snow. Afterwards I saw also that the old man had been a-foot for about a mile only. Probably he was out of practice in the saddle, and so would naturally want a rest. As the smaller rifle rested against the bank, the shoulder sling had trailed in the snow, and when they came to the spying place the man with the glass had had only one rifle—the large one—and one stick to rest on the ground. I saw exactly where the deer had been by sighting along the mark left on the snowy bank where the glass had rested, and I noticed where the beard of the owner had fretted the snow. There were not many deer, as the glass had not ranged around but had been directed only to one point, and there was nothing worth while or some attempt would have been made, as the stalk should have been an easy one. As to the pipe-lid, I found it where the pedestrian, on lighting up, had thrown away the wad of paper that had secured the plug of tobacco remaining over in the pipe from a former smoke. I was sorry that I could not make out whether the old man ever took a whiff or not, and I am still wondering about it to this day. Probably I shall never find out, but at all events I did not allow him a draw on that part of the way where I retraced their steps. I trust they had good sport with the hinds, but that also must remain the secret of the silent hills. After many ups and downs, I came alongside Loch Lungard, where the path was very flinty and also very slushy. These conditions did not make for pleasant riding, but presently I noticed that at the edge of the loch there was a strip of nice, solid looking sand with only an inch or two of water gently lapping over it, so I turned my mount literally into the loch, and enjoyed a spell of good surface, though the going was heavy owing to the considerable resistance offered by the water. After a short distance a bank projecting into the loch compelled me to desist from my aquatic acrobatics, and just as I was regaining *terra*

firma I came face to face with a pedestrian of the professional sort—whence or whither bound or why, no man might tell, but his astonishment seemed to be greater than mine when he beheld the apparition of a cyclist calmly emerging, as it must have appeared, from the depths of the lonely mountain loch in the midst of a winter storm. In order to reassure him, I remarked that it was a fine day, but instead of vouchsafing an answer in the affirmative, or even in the negative, he merely stood and gazed after me. I reflected that probably the poor man was a bit eccentric! Thus I plodded along by the foot of the massive Beinn Fhionnlaidh, which gives its name to Benula forest and lodge. The two names are similarly pronounced, but the latter spelling, now commonly used, is merely a modern barbarism. At the lodge, the old name of which was Lub-na-damph, “a rough road is joined once more,” as the Contour Road Book informs us. True, it was rough, especially in winter, but still it was a road, and so was very welcome. The day was now bright and sharp, and promised hard frost in the evening. After a few miles of Glen Cannich, I again knocked at a hospitable door, and there enjoyed very grateful refreshments and a rest that was all too long. When I attempted to resume my journey, I found that the wheels simply refused to revolve, being stuck fast in the ice which had formed from the slush with which they were so completely encrusted on arrival. This was removed with an axe, and a spin down the first hill soon restored the wonted freedom to the wheels. The stars were now twinkling like merry eyes, and the moon already glorified the scene. The remaining run to Cannich was comparatively simple in spite of the snow. As I went, the deer streamed across the road, escaping hillwards from the river banks where they had been making the best of the bad foraging, some of the last comers being occasionally cut off in their flight when I had a good slope in my favour. And so the miles sped, down the long bare glen, through the birch woods, to Cannich and dinner.