

## MY BALMORAL TRIP.

BY JAMES MACKINTOSH.

IN the year 1877, before the great rains of that year, which continued until 10th Sept., I grew wearied of my farm existence, and shouldering my leather bag, containing a few hard-boiled eggs, pies, and a pint of whisky, and pocketing two pound notes, I started on a foot tour. My intention was to go by Clova, over Lochnagar, by Balmoral, up the Dee stream, over Ben Macdhui, down the Spey valley, viewing, if not scaling, high mountains, visit Ben Nevis, and home by the Perthshire mountains. To sleep in the open air, eat hard-boiled eggs mainly, and drink whisky was my plan. It was a beautiful afternoon in July. The sun shone; but a thunder storm rolled south from Catlaw towards Dundee. I thought I should pass by the east side of it, but it overtook me at the Bow of Benshie. I sheltered myself under my umbrella, and it passed off. Coming to Cortachy Church, and the Castle of the Airlies, a magnificent residence, I went, as I supposed, up the Clova valley, and only became aware of my error on coming in sight of my own home, near Forfar. I was at the foot of St. Arnold's Seat. It was too late to climb it, so turning up by the west side of it I came to a farm house, the only one visible. It was now sundown. I had supper, and started across the heather, due west for Clova. Up the valley I went. It has rich pastures of the purest grass, soft as the softest sofa. Patches of snow were on the hills, which had an amphitheatre sweep. A holy Sabbath stillness reigned. Night gathered around. I made my way to a roofless out-house—it was nothing but a ruined dwelling-house, of ages gone by. There were many of them there. There were cattle around. I might be safe, but I might not, so I started again and came to a branch road. It ended, however. The trees were dripping on each side. I out with my knife, cut a quantity of heather, made my

bed between the trees, and slept for two hours. Starting at two a.m., I came in the silence past the hotel. The waters were making a noise behind it, the rocks were almost perpendicular. Along the valley was nothing but a narrow level alluvial sheet, with a burn tripping through it, faced like a wide street with enormous even up walls on both sides. Farm houses were embowered in orchard trees, and further up, sheep in apparently inaccessible clefts. On coming to a bridge leading to the south side of the river, I found the road barred by a formidable farm dog. The road ran close past the house. Turning up a private road on the north side, I went through wood and moor, and open pasture, most emerald, until I came past the only valley which opens into Clova. It is on the west side. The games, I took it, were held there. A mansion house and a manse are in the glack. A long sward borders the river, equal to Perth Inch, and even Cleveland, Ohio. I passed some shepherd houses, then the valley narrowed and the ascent became steep. Perpendicular rocks closed on the north bank of the river. At four a.m., clouds like snow came driving over the edge of the lofty precipice, but dissipated below the brow. The valley remained unclouded. I crossed the river, stepping from stone to stone. It was a formidable feat crossing, but it was better to risk it than go back 20 miles. Once a boulder rolled beneath my foot—my next foot steadied me—hair on end—a roaring, tumbling cataract close by. What possessed me? Never say die! Never did it before, only once since. Up the brae I went until, about 6 a.m., I reached a hunting house at the top of the valley, said to belong to Sir Somebody Mathieson, the proprietor of the aforementioned mansion. I looked in at the various windows—empty hampers, abundance of bottles, and somebody needed to “clare” up everywhere (Uncle Tom), but no human being to be seen. I went in, drew a bed to the door, and slept in the sunshine. Four stalwart fellows, armed with hunting pieces, found me. They got the half of my remaining whisky, and I started over the footpath swing bridge direct for Lochnagar. A fellow came running across the moor, which sweeps up

to its southern aspect, and volunteered his directions. I distinctly understood the man in kilts that the mountain facing me was accessible on the south. It seemed so to me, but I trusted my guide book, and ascended by the cut path from Balmoral, which is on the north side. It would have saved much perpendicular walking, and a day's journey almost, to have taken the Highlandman's advice. I went on until I came to the brow of an almost precipitous hill looking down upon a small lake through which the Muick runs, beside which is the house where I suppose Byron lived some time. I slid down as it saved much roundaboutness. At the foot of it I crossed the river, stepping from stone to stone—four workmen making roads stopped in amazement and beheld the feat. They were making pleasure roads up the valley. I lunched in the brilliant sunshine, and took a short snooze, then on again; but I had to turn back to seek my knife, which I found where I had lunched. I found the track above the gentleman's seat. Enormous granite blocks grew up around "as if an infant's touch might urge," etc. They had been urged—blasting marks, which must have hurled the severed fragments down upon the site beneath, not dubiously marked them. To go through there was like a dream—surely Walter Scott had been there, and somebody accompanying him had left this souvenir of his walk. I have never seen anything like it. On the top of the precipice, sweeping, and not steep ground, goes around the north and east side of the summit of Lochnagar. It is like a stupendous ruined castle: it is round and as sharp peaked as a peerie. There was snow on the north side. I took some—it would be purer than water, and I had no whisky—it sickened me, and was the main cause of my abandoning my scheme. Down the Queen's path I went, surveyed the height of the mountain to the north, and mistook it for Lochnagar, until the tremendous difference dawned upon me. Then I took the trodden path and kept it. It leads through loose stones and appalling desolation. Not a bird, not a beast, not an insect, not a man within sight in an extensive landscape. Half way

up my foot trod the first snow. Sheltered by a rock, splendid withered grass was beneath it, showing what the climate is capable of, if man could protect his crops during frost. Zig-zag road cut in the face of the slope. Down it a hurl would be dangerous. Arrived at the top, the mark of wheels is seen as of a light cart. No go—came the wrong road. To the east a weirdless wild. Staring black peat without its Highland covering, far, far. Surely waving crops of two years' old wheat might grow. If we sow in September, why not there in spring, and reap two autumns later. Witness the grass aforesaid. But what avail, deer forests must prevail. They make a wilderness, and call it peace. The only building visible in a clear blue sky was Balmoral. To the north the conical form of Cairngorm was conspicuous; to the west, Ben Macdhui reared its awful shoulders—it has no peak. I was standing on the east edge of a gulf which has three sides precipitous as house sides. On the north it was open. I could not see the bottom within four feet of it. I suddenly saw clouds like snow drift driving over the western edge of the gulf. They did not dispel, as in Clova, in the morning; but describing a bow form, the centre of the bow in the centre of the gulf, I was surrounded in a moment by a mist so dense I could not see the ground. Something seemed to draw me over the verge. I shrunk back. Could Byron's story be true, and could the ghosts of the departed hover around the summits of dark Lochnagar, and lure to destruction? It was instantaneous, as if an electric something had swept down my body, and then over the edge, luring me to follow. It was dark enough, but stooping down I discerned after a while the cart tracks, and so regained the northern zig-zag descent. It was an awful crisis. It was the first ascent that year. The path to Balmoral is truly magnificent, following the sweep of a trend of mountains which rise in gentle acclivity to the north of Lochnagar. The mountains stand round about Jerusalem. So do they, and not less lovely around Lochnagar; as if standing in awe, they curve round it. I took some water. It sickened me. I passed through a

plantation of young larch trees, and soon the deep bay of hounds awoke as I entered the postern gate. The kennel is come to first, perhaps to deter strangers, *i.e.*, the public generally, from following the path, which must have been there from eternity. They made a wilderness. They have also forbidden all access to it. The Queen's house and appurtenances lie in the glack between Lochnagar, the trend of mountains to the north of it, and Ben Macdhui. The Dee, a silver stream, ripples by the castle. All is calm. Nothing human there except the Queen and her myrmidons. Not a building is visible except towards Ballater, and the view is stupendous. A lady played "Scots wha hae" as I marched past the dogs, otherwise they might have come at me. Such a rumpus. Cerberus fearfully multiplied at the door of hell. Rain had begun to fall, and so I applied at the forester's house for entertainment, but was denied. I tried the stableman and others; all refused. It rained heavily. The castle is square, with a tower at each corner, and not remarkably big looking. I trudged away towards Ballater, with nothing to eat. A carriage and pair soon passed. Vainly I asked for house room and refreshments of the cottage inhabitants near the castle. Soon the carriage returned. "Will you take a ride?" Sitting on the dickie beside the gallant driver, I soon forgot the coldness of the Royal hospitality. The driver belonged to a horse-hirer at Ballater. We refreshed at the first public-house, and at midnight I found myself before a good supper in a hotel. That night I slept sound as a sailor. Next day I inspected Ballater, and found everything exceedingly, even painfully, clean; washed looking. Stagnation palpable. Immediately after cognoscing the weather, I took train to Aberdeen, and passed through a lively, swelling country, like cultivated sand dunes. Certainly the land of the turnip and enormous fat cattle. Pipes on board, and great heartiness of talk, vivacity of countenance, and gustiness of expression.

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