

## RAMBLES AMONGST THE GALLOWAY HILLS.

BY JAMES STEWART.

FROM early boyhood the great flat summits of the Galloway hills, visible from the home of my youth by the tree-fringed banks of the river Ayr, towering over a range of lesser heights which mark the end of fertility, had a wondrous fascination for me, a hillman compelled of necessity to dwell on the plains. It was in the nature of things, therefore, that at some time I should obey the call of these beckoning giants, and, like Mahomet, go to the mountains. Almost nine years ago I made my initial venture amongst the hills of the ancient province, when, in company with a fellow-worshipper at the shrine of Nature, I set out on a Saturday afternoon at the beginning of April for Dalmellington, where we were joined by a philosopher from the hill-village of Rankinstone, who was our guide and counsellor during the sojourn in the wilds. Our immediate destination was Slaethornrigg, a shepherd's cottage then occupied by genial Robert Wallace, a man whose heart is as genuine as his stature is mighty; a man fitted both by strength and sympathy to dwell amidst the eternal hills. A drive of eight miles brought us to the head of Loch Doon and then seven miles of trackless moorland trenched by countless moss-hags, and abounding in bogs of green slimy ooze of unknown depth, had to be traversed. That tramp over those moorland solitudes will dwell long in my memory. At the outset we directed our steps towards the great bulk of Shalloch-on-Minnoch, which in the twilight shewed black and gigantic against the southern sky; then, as night closed in, and everywhere a deep hushed stillness, which was rendered only the more acute by the occasional bickering of a moorfowl disturbed from its slumbers, had fallen over the heathery waste, we set our course towards the light shining in the window at Slaethornrigg, a beacon that marked a haven of rest.

Looking around the next morning, we saw that on our march the previous night we had crossed a great saucer-shaped depression, the ice cauldron of the Southern Uplands. Activities began with an ascent of Shalloch-on-Minnoch, which rose just behind the cottage. The first part of the climb was merely a walk through heather and over huge granite boulders, but as the distance to the summit grew less, we reached a great patch of snow lying steep on the hillside and extending upwards for about 200 feet; to surmount this, we had to kick steps—we were all novices, and ice-axes were unknown to us in those days. When about halfway over the snow, the mist which had been hanging about the tops came down and enveloped us in its silent folds. Mist on the hills has always had a weird fascination for me; it is so ethereal; so mysterious, one minute surrounding us like an opaque wall beyond which can be heard the whisperings of the genii of the mountain, the next in fantastic and everchanging form whirling along the mountain crests, mountain wraiths materialised. At times it whets the imagination by permitting momentary glimpses of the plains, and so great is the magnifying propensities of this elusive vapour that even on a small hill a great sense of altitude is obtained should one look into a valley through a veil of mist. On our airy perch on the snow this feeling of height was vividly borne upon us as we gazed downward through the rents in the shifting curtain of cloud, and we could almost imagine ourselves to be climbing amidst the eternal snows of some cloud-kissed Alpine height. Once above the snow it did not take long to reach the cairn marking the highest land in Ayrshire, 2570 feet above sea. On this great tableland the mist became very dense; such a mist it must have been that on the heights of Ben Nevis inspired Keats to give to the world those splendid lines, beginning:—

“Read me a lesson Muse, and speak it loud  
Upon the top of Nevis, blind in mist  
I looked into the chasms, and a shroud  
Vapourous doth hide them.”

We crossed the Nick of Carclach—like the necks of the

Transvaal, the Galloway passes are known as nicks—climbed Tarfessock, and ridge-walked to the top of Kerriereoch, a hill rising to a height of 2,562 feet on the borders of Ayrshire and Wigtownshire. This hill, like its neighbour Shalloch-on-Minnoch, is a long, flat-topped mountain bearing vivid evidence, as indeed do all the hills in the locality, of the action of the ice. Descending by the Saugh burn, Loch Enoch, well known to readers of the "Raiders," was reached. Two of us swam out to the islet of the loch; the water, cradled amongst the snows of Merrick, could not by any stretch of imagination be termed warm, but it was a grand tonic, and on landing we enjoyed our tea brewed by the philosopher, who had been busy with culinary operations while we were sporting in the loch. From Loch Enoch's silver strand an impressive view was obtained of the lofty Merrick, the highest mountain in the Scottish mainland south of Ben Lomond. By way of the Nick of the Dungeon we passed over into the Dungeon of Buchan, an ice-worn valley extending from Loch Doon to Glen Trool. We visited Loch Neldricken, Loch Valley, and the Dungeon Lochs of Buchan, then, following the course of the Gala Lane, we skirted the base of Mullwharchar till we reached a scree known locally as the Slock of the Star; up this scree we scrambled, and a pretty stiff ascent we thought it as we picked our way over boulders and loose stones to the summit of the hill. At Dirk Hattrick's cave we rested, and while there discovered on a tree overhanging a cliff a buzzard's nest containing two eggs. After examining the nest and its treasures, we descended to Loch Macaterick, that lake of many bays and promontories, whence a walk of a couple of miles brought us back to our starting point.

Four years later, towards the end of July, I paid another visit to Slaethornrigg where I spent a short holiday. On the morning following my arrival I arose very early and climbed Shalloch-on-Minnoch, reaching the summit as the mists of morning were streaming over the lochs and valleys.

The rosy glow of dawn was in the sky, and sitting by the cairn I watched the spears of golden light glance over the eastern hills, heralds of the sun, which presently appeared

in a blaze of glory, bathing the crests of the mountains in a flood of golden fire. Uplifted in spirit by the magnificence of the sunrise, and invigorated by the breath of that exhilarating air which roams during early morning over the mountains, I descended to the cottage. After breakfast I set off over the moor for the Merrick, which I started to climb from the shores of Loch Enoch. The way led up over heathy slopes, which near the summit merged into grass. As a climb it was easy and uneventful. On reaching the top of the ridge I walked round the lip of a corrie with steep grassy sides, where in winter a decent snow climb might be had; then I crossed over the flat top of the hill to the cairn, which commanded an extensive view of the south-west of Scotland. Everywhere was purple heather, which scattered its fragrance on the breeze. Range upon range of shaggy hills, their sides seared with storms and pierced by countless ribs of silurian rocks which imparted a decided greyness of tone to the scene, rose in glorious confusion all around. Gathered up in the folds of the hills, lochs and tarns innumerable flashed back the image of the sun. In the east a heat haze obscured the distant view, but towards the west and north-west the whole county of Ayr lay like a gigantic map unfolded, a glorious panorama of woody vale and fertile plain, of quiet rural hamlets and busy coast towns, and long stretches of beach washed by the restless sea; whilst towering grandly over the uplands which form the northern boundary of the shire of poetic memories, the noble mountains of the north, aristocrats of the earth by right of ancient lineage, arose in all their grandeur. By the aid of a glass I had no difficulty in picking out Ben Lomond, and I also thought I could discern the Cobbler and the twin peaks of Ben More and Am Binnein. Beyond the fertile plains of Ayr, the sea continued a picture of which Arran's rugged mountains formed a glorious background. Almost due south, in the depths of the glen, was Loch Trool, to my mind the most beautiful loch in the south of Scotland; in the same direction the Machars district of Galloway stretched away from the foothills till it vanished

in an indefinite haze by the sands of Wigtown Bay. Southwest, the atmosphere had an almost prismatic clearness, and away beyond a wide prospect of hill and wood and field, far beyond, the Mull of Galloway, which stood out like a giant breakwater bravely defying Solway's storms and tides, I could see the Emerald Isle lying like a faint cloud on the horizon.

Next day I had intended to climb the Carlin's Cairn, Corsorine and Millfore, the highest points of Kells range, but, alas! the Rain God had apparently arranged to celebrate on that particular day some aquatic festival, and not altogether relishing a lengthy spell of tramping through soaking heather and over rain-swept mountain tops, I devoted part of the day to the piscatorial art; at night a shepherd came over from an adjoining herding, and, in an atmosphere redolent of peat reek and toddy, we passed a social hour or two. Our host related some of his experiences of wild days on the hills, and gave some interesting reminiscences of meetings with famous geologists who had at different times explored the district. In the morning I bade farewell to that romantic land with its memories of Scotia's struggles for religious freedom, its tales of lawless men who found shelter amidst its mountain fastnesses, and its leagues of glorious moorland over which in summer wander heather-scented airs, and where in winter the snow-laden hurricane drives in majesty. It is in truth a glorious land, and the hills, although they do not rise to the sublime heights of the Grampians or the Cairngorms, are right royal hills, and there are always the lochs and the rocks, wind and shadow, sun and rain. There you will find real life, and gain pulsing health and vigour. Go there some time.