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## MY INTRODUCTION TO THE CAIRNGORMS.

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### *PART I.*

It is more than sixty years ago since, with a congenial companion, I set out on a sunny summer Saturday afternoon to make my first pedestrian Highland tour. We had become impressed with the belief that travelling enlarges the mind, conviction of the truth of that opinion having been exemplified in the experience of an eminent citizen who had made the journey from Aberdeen to Stonehaven and back again, and who very properly acknowledged the benefit he had derived from that journey. But in the ardour of youth and inexperience we resolved on making a more ambitious and extended flight than that of Mr. Forbes Frost. Our goal was to be Ben Muich Dhui, that "monarch of mountains," who, so far as we knew, had not been dethroned from the proud position of being the loftiest mountain in Great Britain and Ireland by the sappers and miners, notwithstanding John Hill Burton's insinuating proposal to them that they should keep the height of Ben Nevis about twenty feet under the altitude of Ben Muich Dhui. The Ordnance Surveyors were however inexorable. Not only did they remove Ben Muich Dhui to a lower level than Ben Nevis, but they actually made it four feet lower than Dr. Skene Keith found it to be on 21st. September, 1810. Is it not quite possible, however,



that during the 37 years which intervened between the two measurements Ben Muich Dhui might by denudation have been reduced four feet in height?

When starting on our Highland tour we resolved that we should depart in a manner befitting our lofty enterprise, so as to put it out of the power of anyone to imagine that we were youthful peddlars setting forth on a trading expedition. We therefore secured seats on the outside of a three-horsed coach which ran along the South Deeside Road between Aberdeen and Banchory-Ternan during summer. The fare was 2/6, except the box seat, which being more expensive we eschewed, because, while on pleasure bent like Gilpin, we were of frugal mind. For like reason, no doubt, this coach was patronised by the floaters—a class of navigators now extinct—who before the advent of railways guided rafts of timber from the forests of Braemar to the Raik Dyke at Aberdeen. A convivial company of these gentlemen with their raft ropes and iron-shod stangs were our fellow passengers to their homes at Banchory, “a fair old, rare old, rickety rackety crew,” who failed not to impress us with the notion that we were a’ John Tamson’s bairns.

Although there was a canal there were no railways in Aberdeenshire at the time mentioned. Neither were there flying machines on the earth or in the air except balloons. There were no ordnance maps, and the map of Scotland, projected on a scale of ten miles to an inch, was not very serviceable to tiros in quest of Ben Muich Dhui either in sunshine or fog. A guide was therefore absolutely necessary, and guides for suitable remuneration were to be had at the Castletown of Braemar. These guides were men of good physique, hardy, intelligent, capable of much endurance and fit for duty to a ripe old age. As an example, John Downie of Tomintoul, on the north-east flank of Morrone, kept ponies, and acted as guide till past three score and ten, and farmed, as he pawkily asserted, “the highest cultivated land in Scotland.” John was required on an emergency to guide a party of Englishmen to Ben Muich Dhui. When he was presented to the strangers as their



guide, his venerable and worn-out appearance seemed to them to be so obvious that they were at no pains to conceal their conviction that he was utterly unsuitable and incapable for the task. John, however, conscious of what he could do, undauntedly exclaimed, "Try me, gentlemen! try me!" and after some hesitation, and as better could not be done, the gentlemen consented to try him. The result was, according to John's account, that before the party of well-fed soft-conditioned tourists were half-way up Corrie Etchachan, they were creeping after him "pechin' like a lot o' hens."

This digression may induce the reader to say we have not made much progress in our tour, and that is true, so we apologise. Well, at length we are on the South Deeside Road, which, as everybody knows who has travelled along it in the leafy month of June, is a delightful route. It is richly umbrageous, lined on either side in sylvan beauty by trees in great variety and in full leafage. Their aroma, mingled with the scents from the wild flowers, is grateful to those who have recently escaped from city insanitary smells. We are in the valley of the pellucid Dee, whose verdant and tree-clad banks so impressed by their beauty an eminent apocalyptic expert that he declared he expected the new heaven and the new earth with a sea of glass and crystal thrown in could not be more desirable or delightful quarters hereafter. But our sensuous delight received a rude shock. Without warning our equipage, which had been smoothly tooling along, suddenly stopped, and to our consternation, on looking ahead we beheld our leader, a Rosinante, in a state of strangulation, held upon his feet by the coachman, who had jumped down in the nick of time to prevent a catastrophe. The horse had choked owing to some disarrangement of his harness, which being rectified, and his wind recovered, enabled the journey to be resumed, and we passed Knappach, the name of which seems to indicate plentiful contours, as if nothing unusual had occurred.

Only those who have seen the romantic rocky channel of the River Feugh as we in wonderment gazed upon it



from the bridge which spans it where we crossed the stream, can understand our feelings on seeing it for the first time. After it the arched gateway at the entrance to the avenue of Blackhall, with its life-like effigy of a goat—which fortunately we did not mistake for a red deer, probably owing to its colour—engrossed our attention, and then the bridge across the Dee, with its imperative injunction to drive slowly, occasioned such apprehension of disaster in our minds that before we knew where we were we were in Banchory.

Banchory, the metropolis of the wealthy summer visitor, we found to be a place of some importance. It had three hotels—the Burnett Arms, the Douglas Arms, and a nice quiet, clean, comfortable inn, kept by people of the name of Thomson, where we were made welcome and very comfortable. There was some talk of forming a railway to Banchory about that time, but an Israelite in whom there must have been some guile, threw cold water on the project by declaring that the railway would end in a “mosh.” We saw no “mosh,” and as the railway has been formed and is a great success, we are entitled to believe that the Jew—who despite a local proverb managed to live in Aberdeen—was a slanderer, and being an alien he ought to have been deported.

On the day following our arrival in Banchory we attempted a Sabbath day's journey to the top of the Hill of Scoltie to examine the tower thereon, but the side of the hill which we selected for our ascent was so encumbered by barricades of wind-blown timber that we experienced great difficulty in reaching the tower, and we had to choose an easier way for our descent.

On Monday morning, after an early breakfast, we started on our tramp, the limit of which for that day we proposed to be Ballater. We made our *impedimenta* as light as possible, for the day was hot, uncomfortably so. The police regulations prevented us from adopting the tactics of an expedition which we encountered in Glen Derry on a summer afternoon on its way to bivouac under the Shelter Stone at Loch Avon. That party was walking



in single file, each individual *sans culotte*, carrying his trousers rolled up under his arm or swung on his back very comfortably, and without the slightest sense of "impropriety." But then that was Glen Derry, where solitude has its charms and advantages. We were on the turnpike road leading from Banchory to Ballater, and what might be winked at in Glen Derry might not have been smiled upon in Banchory any more than the harem skirt. We carried no ice axes or coils of life-preserving ropes for rock climbing, our knowledge of the necessity for these useful accessories among our mountains being as yet imperfect. Strapped upon my shoulders, my leather portmanteau—measuring outside eighteen inches long, eight inches wide, and six inches deep—contained a night-shirt, an extra pair of stockings, a needle and thread, and other necessary nick-nacks which sufficiently served my limited requirements. My companion was similarly equipped.

The day was tropical—not a drop of rain, brilliant sunshine, and for music the hum of bees gathering honey from abundant blossom on the lime trees, as busy as hatters. Our route lay through the village of Kincardine O'Neil, the railway circumbendibus by Torphins and Lumphanan being at that time non-existent. Of course, we therefore avoided Satan's Den, and missed seeing at Lumphanan the tumulus over the carcass of Macbeth, the usurper and murderer of good King Duncan. We also missed seeing the Peel at Peel Bog and the Loch of Auchlossan, where, until it was drained, the wild duck and numerous other water fowl lived in a kind of Paradise, and were fruitful and multiplied in utter disregard of the philosophy of Malthus. But then by going by Potarch we had the satisfaction of seeing the place where another murderer, Caird Young, made a daring, flying leap over the rocky chasm through which the whole volume of the river Dee flows, and thereby for the time escaped capture by his pursuers. A similar feat had, however, been performed previously at Killiecrankie, where, assisted by the apprehension of a prod from a Hielan' dirk in his hind-quarters, a fugitive from the battle-field jumped the river



Garry and escaped scarification in a region where heroes would be ashamed to be wounded.

Unacquainted as we were with the history and antiquities of Kincardine O'Neil, the beauty of its situation and surroundings, although observed and appreciated, did not induce us to break our journey there, and by the time we had walked about ten miles from Banchory, the inner man began to remind us that nature abhors a vacuum and to suggest that we ought to refresh. My companion, whose local geography was more extensive than mine, remembered that we were in the neighbourhood of the Sloc of Dess, and when we reached the Burn of Dess, which flows under the turnpike road hereabouts in its course from the Loch of Auchlossan to the Dee, we struck off the road, and keeping the right bank of the stream soon reached the pretty little waterfall of the Sloc, where in the language of Buchan we also slocked, although not with intoxicating liquor, and oblivious of the fact that unfiltered surface water may contain objectionable lodgers, such as *bacillus coli*, derived from other vertebrates than those of the genus homo.

Rested and refreshed, we again started on our journey, and passing through the tidy village of Aboyne with its ample "green," we soon came in sight of the Muir of Dinnet in a blaze of grouse heather. The sight was magnificent, and beholding in front of us "Morven of snow" towering above his consort Culblean, and Mount Keen looking over the hills of Glentanner at Ballaterach—where Lord Byron lived as a summer lodger when he was a mischievous nickum at our Grammar School—we felt that we had reason to be proud of our country, and that Queen Victoria had shown great wisdom, propriety, and good taste in selecting Balmoral as her summer quarters. We did not know that the Muir of Dinnet had at one time been covered by a great lake about 130 feet deep above Loch Kinnord—as the Rev. Mr. Michie had not yet made his investigations and discoveries. Yet the late Dean Ramsay's story of a wig lost there and the result of the search for it confers such celebrity on the Muir as, in our opinion, to outweigh all other important events in its



history. To those who do not know the story it is worth repeating. Here it is. In those days when lairds were more convivial than they are now, and could afford to be so, the Laird of B—— was, at a somewhat late hour, riding homewards across the Muir of Dinnet, attended by his serving man, Saunders. Both had their capacity for good liquor fully occupied. The night was dark and windy, and a somewhat rude gust of wind uplifted and separated the laird's hat and wig. The serving man dismounted, and groping in the darkness for the hat and wig, laid his hand upon a small divot or sod, and believing it to be the lost wig, he clapped it on the laird's bald pate. The sod being damp, recalled by its refreshing coolness the laird to his senses, and he at once exclaimed, "That's nae my wig, Saunders!" Saunders, however, confident that the wig it was, insisted, "It maun be your wig, laird. There's nae wyle o' wigs on the Muir o' Dinnet." Which was and is a fact.

Of course, we inspected the Burn of the Vat, or Rob Roy's Cave, as it is otherwise called, and speculated on the enormous power of frost, ice and water, evidenced by the tear and wear of the huge granitic rocks, which bar and environ the stream. If Gilderoy or any other kilted cateran dwelt there it must have been in summer, for we could not believe that any human being wearing the kilt could have lived in that windy, watery hole in winter. By the road passing Wisdom Howe we reached sweet Cambus o' May, and the lovely valley of the Dee, bounded on the south by Pananich, with its medicinal waters, and in the west by the Coyles of Muick and Craigen-darroch, with Ballater nestling at its foot, where, at the Monaltrie Arms, we found we had the honour to sleep under the same roof with a noble earl, his factor and party, who were making an excursion to Braemar. His lordship, then a comparatively young man, ultimately developed a predilection for lay preaching and teetotalism. At rent collections he improved the occasion by lecturing drouthy wights on the impropriety of their carousals. On an occasion when he was prolonging a moral drenching to



what the subject of it considered an unreasonable length, the said subject—who was by his neighbours considered to be scarcely responsible mentally—suddenly diverted the stream of wholesome advice by pointing to the factor and exclaiming, “There’s a lad that can tak’ a gey sook!” And the said lad looked as amazed as if a bombshell had suddenly exploded at his feet.

*(To be continued)*

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THE SONG OF THE OPEN ROAD.

I.

Verily the winds are calling, sweeping inward from the bay,  
Where the long white line of breakers meets the sky-line far away;  
And the great gaunt ghostly headlands rise so naked, bare, and brown,  
With the mighty sweep of moorland and the splendid reach of down.

II.

Golden gorse and purple heather, shining stretch of yellow sand;  
Call of petrel far to seaward, call of bittern from the land;  
Wilderness of thorn and thistle, wind-swept dune and stunted tree;  
Flash of white-wing, cry of sea fowl, breath of blossom, hum of bee.

III.

These and thousand thousand voices call me forth and I must rise,  
Wander out upon the moorlands underneath God’s naked skies;  
So I lay aside my burden, daily work and daily load,  
And I hearken to the voices calling to the open road.