

ON THE ROADS TO HELVELLYN.

BY SIR LESLIE MACKENZIE.

I.

WE were at Glenridding. From that point there are at least three well-known ways to Helvellyn, and as many more as you choose to take if you are not content with the common paths. Which, if any, of these the poor lady took that died of exhaustion the other day in Grisedale, the sad note about her death did not say. Perhaps she came from the Thirlmere side, intending, with her two girls, to come down by Grisedale to Patterdale. Helvellyn is a romantic name and draws all the world; but middle-age and adolescence cannot safely climb hills together, and this tempting mountain has taken another human life. Fate is as incalculable as the mist of the fells. The two children that started so gaily with their mother are now motherless, and we can only place our stone on her memorial cairn. It is a very sad story.

As we were not climbers, and were conscious of no passion for the conquering of hills, big or little, we first experimented among the three ways to Helvellyn. Accident made us turn up at Patterdale Hall. This beautiful mansion, just in a little from the road, stands high enough to enjoy a view of the lake-end and the hills to eastward. Here pines and spruces and oaks and other trees are enough, not to make pretty branchings only, but to clothe the mouth of Grisedale with "a dark and gloomy wood." And the never-ceasing voices of Nature almost command a silence of all others, and one can enter the mood of the old wanderer from the dales

when, seeking for a place along these lands to rest at last, he said to himself crooningly, as if in memory of many nights and days—

Here at the end I shall rest me in peace,
When Night draws around me her delicate pall ;
But leave me the rustle of wind in the trees
And the song of the waters by Patterdale Hall.

A little way up the road, an old man stood waiting at the gate to open it for us and to show us the way—quite unnecessary, of course, for at that point no one could mistake it.

“What time of day has it got to?” he enquired, and I told him.

“It is thirty years since I climbed Helvellyn. I am seventy-three. I can't get a job in the dales. They will not engage folk now.”

“You will go up that hill,” he continued, “and you will pass the little wood up there. There is an opening in the dyke: you can see it. You will go through that. You will see Helvellyn when you get there, and you will not see it *till* you get there. I am too old now; but I come up here and directs folk and gets a copper or two and lay up a bit of baccy for the winter.”

And we passed across Grisedale and slanted up the slope on the other side, enjoying every foot of the way in the late afternoon sun. As we got to the 2000 feet level, we met some people coming down from Helvellyn by Striding Edge. The name has a fascination. One woman assured us that she had not gone over the Edge because three weeks ago she had had a bad heart seizure and thought it wiser to wait until her friends went and came again. Even the slant up to the 2000 feet level seemed somewhat modern treatment for people that take heart seizures; but she seemed all right and suffering no harm. Then we met a father with a son seven years old. The seven-year-old had been on the top and had come prancing over Striding Edge without dreaming of danger, and certainly without manifest

fatigue, and there were several more before the stream passed. At last we got to the old man's gate and verified his last memory of thirty years ago and drank in the soft glooms of Red Tarn and the beautiful lights and shadows of Swirral Edge. Then we wandered down, happy to have seen the great corrie with Red Tarn at the bottom and the sharp pike of Catchedicam. Everything in this region shows at full value. It did not need the genius of the Lake poets or of anybody else to say the Lakes were beautiful. It was our first long visit to these hills; but to see them and understand them you must walk the distances. Otherwise you are sure to miss beautiful clouds, or mists, or glooms that cannot be painted.

II.

So we settled down for a little and moved about among the nearer beauties of Ullswater. One day—indeed, most days—it was a row on the lake; another day it was a scramble up a near fell where we could see Helvellyn far away; yet another, wandering round into an unexplored dale or a visit to Aira Force. There is a traditional "Wordsworth Cottage" near Patterdale. When we asked a lady whether this that we were looking at was "Wordsworth's Cottage," her answer was sharp and clean: "I don't know whether it is or isn't; but that's what they call it." If you look through a Wordsworth, you will find proof that he had wandered "at his own sweet will" over every foot of this ground. The proofs are more manifest to the eye away south at Ambleside and Rydal; but the Wordsworth we revere is the Great Presence of all this country. That is why we wish to go about alone and silent, seeing what he saw and remembering what he wrote. To the people of Scotland, this habit is not unfamiliar; for over most of Scotland, Scott is our guide, and over great areas of the south-west, Burns is an atmosphere. Nor do we forget the Border and its consecrations. But Wordsworth stands alone. There were other "Lake Poets"; but if

I were asked on a sudden to say what the "purpose" of these lakes and hills was, I fear that I should answer—
"To be the home of the Wordsworth spirit."

The cloud of mortal destiny,
Others will front it fearlessly
But who, like him, will put it by?

Keep fresh the grass upon his grave,
O Rotha, with thy living wave!
Sing him thy best! for few or none
Hears thy voice right, now he is gone.

These are among the most beautiful lines Arnold ever wrote. Now and again in the talk of the visitors we hear hesitating complaint about the invasion of the char-a-bancs and the noises of the innumerable motors and motor-cycles. It is a foolish complaint; but the psychology of it is very simple: it is an unconscious way of saying—"How I wish I were alone here; for it is by this lake that he saw *The Daffodils* and he wrote verses on the bridge near *Brother's Water* and he made blank verse out of the shadows and silences and deep notes of *Aira Force*, and he thought almost all he saw worth writing about even 'the meanest flower that blows.'" On purpose, we did not take a Wordsworth text with us; but as the days passed, the longing for him grew stronger and one day, at the local bookshop—not a bad shop either—I asked for a Wordsworth: but there was none to be had. There were maps, and magazines, and endless stories and photographs and brochures about *Lakeland*; but of his poems, not a copy. This also is a tribute to the poet; he is "held as read."

III.

But a day came when we sought the near sight of *Helvellyn* once more. This time, we wandered up *Glenridding* by the lead mines and leftwards into the valley beyond them. This brought us once more within sight of the mountain, but now we saw it from the north side. The lead mines are another invasion supposed to

be foreign to the Wordsworthian spirit and I wonder why. We followed the lades that brought the hill waters to wash out the grains of galena from the crushed rock ; but we noticed that the stonecrops and the mosses and the hill grasses grew as beautifully on the sides of the lades as they did on the natural becks, and the gliding water shone as lovely in the afternoon sun. I cannot find it in me to say that industrial man has spoiled this valley ; for it only needs a standpoint to transform the grey heaps of rubble and the dull grey-wacke houses and the moving or standing water-wheels into glories of landscape. When the looker-on says these things are ugly, he has not yet found the right point of view. Let him wait and his hour of revelation will come when "Nature for once has sung in tune."

On the going up and on the coming down, we had some talk with an old shepherd of eighty and his wife two years younger. We told him we had seen the power-house further up the valley and he said—"Yes, that is where we used to wash our sheep. I have shepherded over Helvellyn many a time ; but now I am too old." And then we learned that his wife had brought up a family of ten and had never climbed a fell. "When a lady asked me I said to her 'Take this little one and see if you would like to carry it to the top of the fell.' Well, I am quite pleased to stay at home." Then we struck a curious Scots phrase. The old man said, "We are sair fashed wi' the deer." I tried to find from him whether "sair fashed" was part of his own dialect, or adopted from Scotch. He could not tell us ; but we concluded that the phrase had wandered in from Scotland. But he wondered if we knew Kirkstone Pass. He told us that if we went there, we should find the talk "very broad." A younger shepherd joined the little group with his three dogs : one of them, a beautiful young collie, had been "out only eight months." She was thin and restless. We indicated as much. "She is too onaisy to thrive," was his answer. And so once more we wandered home in the evening, finding out a good

deal about the children of the upper village and noting many evidences of rich interests and imaginations. In certain fundamentals they are like all the children we have met, even in the quietness of the Hebrides; for we found that here, as there, small investments of capital in children's hands produce a greater return in happiness than any other investment known to us. It may be as unprincipled as many other forms of capitalist adventure; but the immediate delight of the speculation is beyond comparison.

IV.

Not yet, however, did we dare Helvellyn in earnest. But a day came when we thought it our duty to do so. Up Glenridding once more we went, starting early. It was an unpromising day, but the sea-tangle at the door—an unfailing weather-glass—was growing slightly crisper and we concluded, against the majority, that the day would clear. We wandered on beyond the powerhouse and ended at Keppelcove Tarn. Others like ourselves had missed the green pony path that zig-zags up the hill a quarter of a mile below the tarn; but we corrected each other and re-read our Ordnance map, in which the zig-zag pony track was marked but not the little bit of road to the tarn. But the extra walk was worth ten times the trouble; for beyond the tarn we were in the silence of a group of corries as beautiful as we had seen on the other side of the mountain a week earlier. This time we were on the north-west of Catchedicam, having Swirral Edge on the left and Keppelcove on the right and the Lower Man in front. It was a place to wander in all day watching the shifting mists. The rain grew heavy for a while and we made our way back to the pony path and then up the hill to the 2,800 feet level. The mistake had cost time and it was too late to go farther; but our third approach was full of interest; for, near this ridge, we came on our young shepherd once more with his three dogs working wonders among the sheep. His modulated whistles were music in the silence. Those three faithful slaves

went and came, and came and went, gathering groups here and scattering them there, that their master might examine the individual sheep for maggots and assure himself that all was well. From lower down we had seen the dark figure on the ridge and heard the sweet notes of the whistle and his peculiar cries, one sending the dogs away, the other bringing them near, and later we again had some conversation with him. "You are training the young dog?" She was putting her whole soul into keeping together a group of twenty or thirty sheep and bringing them up the hill to his feet, working with the passion of youth and the skill of age, passing right and left and round about and keeping them all in the group. "No," he replied, "she is training herself. She has done that of her own accord." And her actions were certainly wonderful. We began to wonder on what basis these extraordinary animals are trained. Probably, by this gathering of the flocks, the dog is only showing the instinct of his herd for bringing together the defenceless sheep for destruction by direction of the leaders. The civilised shepherd takes advantage of this instinct, vainly imagining that he is cultivating the animal's intellect when he is merely assisting in the adaptation of instinctive actions to one or two new conditions. It is so easy to suggest that the animal thinks as we do; it is more difficult to understand how an inherited instinct will work somehow in spite of every obstacle, and the appearance of intelligence may be due only to the fact that, unlike the dog, acting in the wild with the pack, the collie dog is acting alone with man, who has taken the place of the pack and revived the animal's herd language. He is doing in association with men what his ancestors did in association with the leaders of the pack. The speculation is open to criticism, of course; but I have known animals for all my life and I am sure that for the most part we misunderstand their language, giving their actions an interpretation favourable to ourselves. But that is by the way. Our half-hour's talk with the young shepherd

covered many things, and then he strode away from us with a masterly swing and the next we saw of him he was coming down the face of the corrie beyond Keppelcove, and we were beginning to understand the subtlety of the life on these hills and to wonder whether mere made streets could ever interest us again. But we did get to the top of the 2,800 feet ridge and saw over into Thirlmere and Keswick and as far as Bassenthwaite. The Solway was not to appear until the day when we saw it from the top of Helvellyn. The day *had* cleared up and the sea-tangle was right.

v.

Yet once more, drawn who knows how, we wandered up towards the lead mines. This time we fell in with a bright and friendly boy of ten. He belonged to the Dale, but he had been born in London. He had also been to Gretna and lived there for a period during the war. He had things to tell of it, too; for instance, that the school, instead of being a mile and a half away as here, was just across the road and he could be there in one minute. In a visit to Gretna, I saw that school and it was certainly an inviting modern place; but I could not have seen my young friend, for there were no children of three. But he told us that there was little doing in the Dales; it was not like Gretna; you had the pictures there to go to at any time; there were no pictures here. But for all the longing, the boy was bursting with the life of the Dale and knew every place and person. What did he wish to be when he grew up? His father, he said, wanted him to go into the Navy, but he wanted to work at the mines. Had he ever been in the mines? "No. You see I am a bit nervous, and I get dizzy. But my father works at the Deddip." (This, he explained, means "dead heap," the rejected hewings of the mine.) "He has worked at it for twenty years." "My father," he continued, sweeping his hand up towards the hillside, "put out all that." One could understand the boy's adoration of the

labour and constancy that had built up those tens of thousands of tons of rubble. Obviously, he was very proud of it. Then he told us how he went with the hunt when the Dale was out after the foxes. "A shepherd once fell over that rock," pointing to the right. "When the hounds came near, they cried 'Oomf-oomf' and everybody thought it was a fox, but it was the dead shepherd. My father told me the story." How long ago had that happened? Recently? "Oh, no—twenty years ago." But the vividness of the narrative gave the feeling that it might have happened last week. Then I asked how they did with the foxes. "They give the flesh of the foxes to the hounds. It's always flesh they give to the hounds. Sometimes they give them a horse. They must have flesh o' summat. They turn oop their noses at milk; it's watter they want. Oh yes, the hounds must always have the flesh o' summat!" The boy was not alone in his interest in the fox hunting. Everybody knows the foxes among those hills and, apparently, the hunt is a very living sport in the Dales and an economic necessity. We learned, too, about the local schools, the effect of the long walk of two miles on the young children, and many other social facts. He was a clever boy and made an active living in the Dale. "The child is father of the man," and his future is sure. This happy interview and the soft lights of the afternoon seemed to be enough for the day.

VI.

Another serious approach to Helvellyn, undertaken with two friends, failed because the wind became positively violent; the rain came in torrents and the hills were hidden in mist. The change came on within an hour and as we forced our way up the pony path, we met a large party that had been driven down by stress of wind and wet. But, the day following, the whole countryside was clean and clear and brilliant. "The day" had come at last, and for the fourth time we stepped out on the old path. So certain were we of

succeeding this time that we spent half an hour or more going round with the foreman at the mine works and seeing in detail how, by the simplest of hydraulic processes, the grains of galena were separated from the crushings of rock.

Then we continued our gentle walk and once more reached the 2,800 feet ridge. Then there was a slight descent and a sharper rise to the peak known as the Lower Man. The ascent was over and the charming plateau of Helvellyn lay before us. Going to the very highest spot was a trifling detail now; for the air was as clear as crystal and our eyes were filled with the most beautiful mountain scenery we have ever seen except twice: once, when the whole stretch of the Bernese Oberland burst upon the view as we reached the top of the Schynige Platte; next, when we left the Col des Aravis and came to the steep bank of the Vale of Chamonix. Perhaps, too, the west of Sutherland as we steamed out of Lochinchard was more splendid; but these are only different forms of beauty and perhaps forms of beauty cannot really be compared. But now, for the first time, we understood the magnetism of Helvellyn and we rejoiced with all English people in the possession of this superb garden of hills. To the south, we could see Morecambe Bay; to the north, we could see across the Solway to Criffel Hill and our familiar friends there; to the east, we could see the ridges of Yorkshire; to the west we could guess the sea.

But we had to fulfil the final convention and visit the memorial monument and read the lines from Wordsworth and from Scott. But just here, so jealous were we that these two should be shown at their best, we were acutely disappointed. Scott's lines have always been a joy to the schoolboy and they have helped to make Helvellyn famous over the world and his last three stanzas would hold their own in any anthology of verses of this order. But Wordsworth's "Fidelity" is not Wordsworth at his best and we were tempted to say so. But, however much he wrote that was relatively common-

place, the world has forgiven everything to the man that wrote—

Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns ;

and

For old unhappy far-off things,
And battles long ago,

and how many more of the first poetic excellence! Wordsworth was too great a poet not to know, in spite of his theories, the obvious difference between his many finger exercises and his few masterpieces. But if I had been selecting from him an inscription for this memorial monument, I should have preferred one of his really great things : this, for instance—

. Thou has left behind
Powers that will work for thee, air, earth and
skies :
There's not a breathing of the common wind
That will forget thee ; thou hast great allies ;
Thy friends are exultations, agonies,
And love, and man's unconquerable mind.

We wandered about rejoicing with a crowd of visitors, coming and going over Swirral Edge and Striding Edge and from the direction of Dollywaggon Pyke. To one keen youth, as he came from that side and immediately stepped down the steep path that leads to Striding Edge, I called out, knowing him—"This is your twenty-sixth time here, isn't it?" "Yes, the twenty-sixth time!" he shouted as he vanished down the slope. Then unwillingly we took our way down again ; but we knew that we had looked on a picture whose beauty would never fade.