

THE FIR MOUNTH AND THE FUNGLE ROADS.

BY WALTER A. SMITH.

THE interesting article by Mr. Walter A. Reid in the April, 1919, number of *The Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal* aroused my desire to explore the "Fir Mounth" and the "Fungle" roads. But it was only in June last year (1924) that I, in company with two good friends, was able to arrange to do so. And it occurred to me that as it happened, by a lucky chance, I had the pleasure of meeting (for the first time) Mr. Reid, on this occasion, on the very summit of the "Fir Mounth" itself it might not be considered inappropriate, as we are both old members of the Cairngorm Club, that this record of a traverse of these two ancient mountain paths might perhaps be considered worthy of a place on the pages of the excellent *Journal* of that Club.

The boundary line of Forfar- and Aberdeen- shires runs high up, east to west, along the lonely rugged ridges of the eastern granite Grampians, from Mount Battock (2555 ft.) in the east to Mount Keen (3077 ft.) in the west. Between the valleys of the Esk and the Dee rise rough wild hills and moors in rather bewildering masses of, on the whole, so similar a character and height, and broken up as they are by such a number of glens, many of considerable depth, their bright clear streams running through the heather in a somewhat perplexing variety of directions, that were it not for three more or less well defined old paths across them it would not be an easy task to find one's way over this 15 miles of "highland" from the one main valley to the other, and it is only on the third of these that the wanderer will pass a habitation at which he could ask his way!

To approach this region you take the train to the pleasant little town of Edzell, and after passing the night at one of the two comfortable hotels there you

drive up the lovely birch and broom-clad valley of the Esk for 11 miles to the little hamlet of Tarfside. The driving road continues for about four miles farther to Loch Lee Church and Invermark, the Earl of Dalhousie's shooting Lodge, and it is from here that the most westerly of the three old hill paths to Deeside ascends steeply by "the Ladder" to the west of Mount Keen, and goes over to the far head of Glen Tanner. Near the foot of the "the Ladder" is a stone encircled well where Queen Victoria and Prince Albert rested in 1861. On the stone is now inscribed,

"Rest Traveller on this lonely green
And drink, and pray for Scotland's Queen."

At about eight miles over this route the path divides—one branch ascends again to the north west and descends to Ballater (five miles): the other branch (10 miles) continues all the way down the Water of Tanner to Aboyne.

But we had traversed the Ballater route many years ago, and it is with the other two mentioned as a heading to this brief narrative that we now propose to deal. We explored them one week-end of June. They both start from the hamlet of Tarfside. In fact for the first five miles they are identical. Unfortunately there is no inn here. (It would be an ideal situation for a mountaineers' hostelry!)

We went north from Tarfside to Dinnet by the "Fir Mounth," probably the most anciently used hill road in the Highlands. It was traversed in 1296 and 1303 by the invading army of King Edward I.* of England, by King James IV. of Scotland in 1504 on a pilgrimage to St. Duthac's Church at Tain, and by the army of the Marquis of Montrose in 1645. As it ascends more or less steeply to over a height of about 2,250 ft., one wonders how these heavily clad English soldiers managed

* Mr. G. M. Fraser in his interesting book "The Old Deeside Road," asserts that King Edward I. more probably came north by the "Cairn a Mounth" road from Fettercairn farther to the east.—The above statements are recorded, I am informed, on a stone near Dinnet.

to get over it $6\frac{1}{4}$ centuries ago! It is now only traceable by occasional rough zig-zag cuttings and frequent large old cairns. The first two miles are, however, by a fairly good cart road till you reach the Burn of Tennet flowing down from the north-east to join the rapid stream of the Tarf. Here the cart road goes up Glen Tennet to a farm on the moor, but the old track after crossing that burn continues due north by the large cottage called Shinfar, which was all shut up that lovely summer morning as we passed it. But the sky was blue, the big hills to the north were clear to their hoary summits, and the streams sparkled in the sunshine as they rattled down their rocky beds through the heather. So we cheerfully left behind us this last (until the end of our hill crossing) sign of human habitation and descending slightly crossed the Clearach stream, and climbed gradually by the east end of a ruinous sheep fank with the Clearach glen to our right and the long straight Kidloch Burn down on our left. Ascending rather more steeply now we reach the rougher stoney moor over which a generally well-marked path of granite gravel, marked by a few cairns, brings us to the point marked 1825 ft. on the $\frac{1}{2}$ inch scale Ordnance Map. This is where the "Fungle Road" to Aboyne strikes away slightly E. of N. (We returned south by it two days later.) The "Fir Mounth," marked by cairns, now climbs steeply for a mile, with a cut zig-zag near the top to Tombie Hill (2350 ft.) and then continues due N. along the heights with the Hill of Cat (2435 ft.) on the left and Cannock (2396 ft.) on the right. A magnificent panorama of mountains to the west and to the north is now obtained as we walk along the ridge. At a level green part of the path, with a deer fence on the left, a charming cold well will be found (St. Colme's Well) with a stone at its head on which is carved a cross, and the words, "Well Beloved."

Descending now gradually by the east of the deer fence to about the 1750 ft. level, and passing, in rather marshy ground, the sources of a western tributary of the

Water of Feugh, we can see away far down to the east the green fields and the few houses in the treeless Forest of Birse. At this lower dip in the route a curious ruined chimney is passed on the right, probably the remains of an old sapper's hut. Climbing again due N, to get once more near the deer fence running along the heights of Craigmahandle (1878 ft.), we come, in about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile from the old chimney, to a gate in the deer fence through which the path proceeds, and descends among the heather into the great pine forest of Glen Tanner. The walk down among the grand old trees in the warm early evening light was most enchanting, and in about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles below the gate brought us to the wooden bridge over the Skinna burn. Alas, after this, after crossing the burn, the way was changed to a scene of burnt desolation as we entered into the region of the great forest fire that made such sad havoc of the woods a couple of years ago, and the path was much obstructed by the fallen and cut-down branches of the burnt trees. But in about two miles more we got clear of this rather heart-breaking area, and reached the pleasant broad green park, in which lies the picturesque small thatched church of St. Lesmo. A little way north of the church we crossed the Tanner River by the old arched Bridge of Braeloine and, crossing the driving road up to Glen Tanner House, went through a gate to the road over Bellrory Hill, and on, N. and W., to the bridge over the Dee at Dinnet, and over it—seeing some salmon and trout in the river as we crossed—to the village and comfortable hotel where we found a good dinner awaiting us. This, needless to say, we heartily enjoyed, after our rather arduous but intensely interesting and most enjoyable rough hill walk of about 16 miles.

Next day was Sunday, a lovely day, and we spent it quietly exploring the beauties of Loch Kinord and the banks of the Dee. Starting early on Monday morning, we went down the south bank of the river to a short way west of the bridge over from Aboyne, and, leaving the high road at some cottages there, went south up a cart

road, through the wooded Glen of the Allt Dinnie burn, to a cottage called Parkside, where we crossed the burn by a footbridge. This is the beginning of "The Fungle Road," another ancient highway. It is a very lovely road, climbing gradually but steadily up through the forest, above the west side of the stream. A little more than a mile up there is a well with a stone seat at it on which is carved "The Fear of the Lord is a Fountain of Life," and again about another half mile up we pass, at the wayside, a pretty little grassy platform surrounded by a neat old rustic wall on which is inscribed—

"Rest and be Thankful.
Oh, ye Mountains, Oh ye Waters,
Praise ye the Lord."

Through an opening in the forest below this spot, a lovely view is obtained down to the Dee at Aboyne, and of the Loch of Aboyne to the north of it. Very soon after getting out of the wood at its head you cross the burn to its east side, but in about two-thirds of a mile recross it to the west again and go practically due S. (bearing *up* slightly to the W. at first) and over the moor below the eastern slope of Duchery Hill, and descend above the western side of a picturesque deep rocky ravine to the back of old Birse Castle in the valley of the Feugh. The castle has in recent years been restored into a small shooting lodge where we were very civilly received and offered refreshments. (It is approached by its owner by a driving road of 13 miles up the glen from Banchory.) Descending to the Feugh Water below the Castle to the old ford and foot bridge over its western tributary, the burn of Corn (whose source high up among the Hills we had passed on Saturday near the old ruin of a chimney already referred to) we then keep steadily up, by the old road, now much destroyed by storm and floods, above the west side of the Feugh. From the Castle to the point 1825 ft. on the map where, as already stated, this route joins the "Fir Mounth" route is about a $4\frac{1}{2}$ miles climb—very steep after the first three.

Gaining the top in a boggy pass of peat (the path marked by two upright pillars of rock is dry enough on the west side of the black field of peat) we soon came in sight of the big cairns on the "Fir Mounth," and were not very long in getting down the rough moors to Tarfside again. We had trysted a motor car from Edzell to meet us there at 4.30. We arrived at 3.40, and so after a friendly chat with our Saturday morning's acquaintance, the worthy postmistress, who supplied us with soda water to drown the little remaining whisky in our flasks, we had a delightful run down Glen Esk again in ample time to get the evening train home to Edinburgh.

EVENING.

In the fields the sheep are calling,
Where the grass is soft and low ;
Now the evening shades are falling
And the breeze has ceased to blow.
Now the clouds, in league together,
Fold the hill tops, one by one ;
Fades the purple of the heather
To the grey of sky and stone.
I am glad the water's seething
And the river, dark with flood ;
Far more glad that peace is breathing
In the stillness of the wood,
In the smoke that steals towards heaven,
Thin blue grey against the pines ;
But most glad my watch says "Seven,"
For it's then the household dines.