

EASTER IN THE HILLS.

BY D. D. McPHERSON.

FATHER and the Skipper (conjointly referred to hereafter as "we") were off colour. Unseasonable weather had sapped our constitutions and made us susceptible to all the Spring-time aches and pains this flesh is heir to, until we were burdens not only to ourselves, but to all with whom we came into contact. Our respective families, probably in self-defence or with an eye to the usual household upheaval at this season, diagnosed our complaint, prescribed, and anxiously urged a long breath of clean, crisp hill air. Even although the motive was obvious, such consideration from them was, to say the least of it, flattering. This was the one and only tonic we felt that would prevent us from wasting away, and as the Skipper discreetly turned it—

Ours not to make reply,
Ours but to pack and hie.

Thus it came to pass that before our doctors had time to change the medicine we were comfortably settled in an Aviemore hotel for the Easter week-end. Our plans were beautifully indefinite—a quiet, restful holiday with no climbing—a drastic resolution for ardent hill-lovers to make and one that was almost wrecked when, as we steamed into the station, a glorious vision of snowy summits was disclosed. Somehow it survived, and in a humble frame of mind we made our modest arrangements for the morrow.

At an hour next day when invalids venture into the sunshine, we left our hotel in a Morris of ancient vintage and proceeded via Tulloch to Forest Lodge, where we parted with Archie, our chauffeur. The old forest road to Glenmore that morning made one feel it was good to be alive. Sheltered from a blustery wind, and revelling in the sun's warmth, we made our leisurely way to the high ground at

Rynettin, where the forest swerves to the Nethy and discloses the massed glory of the mountains. The shapely Bynack towering over the Nethy foot-hills and showing over its shoulder the crest of Ben Mheadhoin, the long north ridge of Cairngorm rising in three great surges from the moor to the high-set top, and giving *en route* a glimpse of the precipitous crags that overlook the dark ravine of the Garbh Allt, and the gentler grassy slopes of the more distant Lurcher's Crag set above the dark forest of Glenmore, all go to form a picture that impresses by its sheer sublimity and brings home the disturbing thought—How small is man's place in the great scheme of things! A sharp but fortunately brief hail-storm swept over us, but in a few minutes the sun asserted itself and we continued our tramp over the moor to the ruined sheil of Ryvoan, down the lovely little pass that seems like a gate-way to Faerie, to the Green Loch in its saucer-shaped depression, under the steep scree slopes of Craig nan Gall. Here we lolled to our heart's content, while Father discoursed learnedly on optics to account for the bluey-green colour of the water, but the Skipper's attention was fixed on the old trees that litter the bed of the loch, and from these it jumped into the past to the gallant Montrose who passed this way to make history at Inverlochy, and to the cateran chief, the famous Halket Stirk, who kept the glen lively with his merry, cattle-lifting pranks. Beyond the loch the tapered peak of the Double Outlook tempted us sorely, but we resisted, and resumed our walk down the now bare glen, past the lodge to Loch Morlich, stopping every now and then to admire the glorious "close-up" of Cairngorm's vast extent.

For our Sunday tramp we had to thank an old saying—"From the storms of Geal Carn, the floods of the Dorbach, and the wrath of the factor, Good Lord, deliver us." It suggested a visit to the Ailnack Gorge via the Dorbach and return by the Caiplich and Larig an Laoigh. Father was game, and at 9 a.m. the ancient bus appeared. In due course we came to Dorbach Lodge, but, like a race-horse, the old car overshot the winning post and only came to a halt near Fae, about a mile further on. It was partly the



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THE SLUGGAN ROAD. AVIEMORE, LOOKING TOWARDS CAIRNGORM.



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THE PASS OF RYVOAN,
Showing the Green Loch and Lurcher's Crag in the distance.



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THE GREEN LOCH, LOOKING TO RYVOAN.

Skipper's fault, so Archie retired unreprimanded, with instructions to be at Forest Lodge in the evening. Walking on a compass bearing over a range of low-lying grassy hills, we struck the Inchroary track short of the Dorbach watershed to find the land of storm and flood in a very gentle mood. The path was peaty and soft, but improved with height and, except for the short distance from the Allt Dearcaige to the col between Geal Carn Beag and Carn Ruadh-bhreac, it is fairly well defined all the way over to the Ailnack Ford. The Skipper, who was leading, camped on a grassy knoll overlooking the ford when Father sauntered up, gave him one look and burst into uproarious laughter. The Skipper eyed him seriously, "Gripes, old man?" he asked, with mock anxiety. "Gripes be blowed," Father retorted, between gurgles; "I never saw anything funnier than your face"—(splutter)—"like a red herring"—(more splutters).

"Imphm," answered the Skipper, "and you ain't no beauty neither. Sit down and get busy, you parboiled lobster," and, setting the example, he began a determined inroad on the contents of his haversack. Over in the Tomintoul direction heavy storm-clouds were massing, making the sun-lit gorge to our right seem ominously bright.

Buckling on our gear again, we began the traverse of the gorge. Keeping as low as possible to see it to the best advantage, we soon found ourselves involved in precipitous ravines, where soft rock and scree rendered progress slow and demanded careful footwork. In almost every re-entrant, landslides had eaten deeply into the hill-sides. Over such places we walked lightly and swiftly to avoid starting avalanches. Only on the narrow, heather-bound ridges where ferns in myriads grew did we feel in safety. There was something eerie in this unstable land where all things seemed held in suspense, and every turn of the deepening gorge strengthened this impression. The stillness was uncanny; the ground, too, seemed to reflect the sunlight in a curious manner, but this we found was caused by a superabundance of mica in the sandstone. Low level walking is as a rule uneventful, but here it was not only physically exacting, but mentally exciting. The appear-

ance of precipitous rock faces rising abruptly from the stream, however, forced us to a higher altitude, and when the particular bastion known as the "Castle" was sighted, we were practically on a level with it. Well above the "Castle" we struck the ordinary track and came to rest at the end of the gorge, overlooking the point where the stream turns through almost three-quarters of a circle. Behind us, down the gorge, was glorious day, before us lay gathering night. Except for an occasional glimpse of the rugged, snow-clad Ben Avon group, we saw nothing but a great, rolling moorland, merging into the darkness beyond.

Following the path to the boundary fence, we struck up the grassy verge of the Caiplich on what now seems like an endless tramp, easy, but monotonous to a degree. The sunlight faded gradually as if loathe to depart. Near a solitary larach, a pitiless hailstorm forced us to sit with our backs to it for half an hour, and we devoted these stinging minutes to supplying physical need, this time without any sauce in the way of personalities. When the storm passed, the Bynack disclosed its proud peak for a little, but Cairngorm and Ben Macdhui never deigned to reveal themselves. Cutting over the moor we became involved in one of the roughest peat hags we had ever experienced. Many of the cuts were six to eight feet deep, and much time was lost negotiating this stretch. It was interesting, however, in that we found roots of large trees embedded in these peat holes, and our conclusion was that at some time this whole district had been swallowed up and turned into dead-land by the hag that now covers it. After the worst was past, Father stopped to give expression to a tired feeling, and in a weak moment requested the Skipper to "sing him to sleep," but he became quite pugilistic when, without any warning, the following atrocity was perpetrated:—

Sore are my feet, the way is long,
This bally life isn't worth an old song.

The Skipper retired out of range. Showers made things uncomfortable all the way over to the Larig an Laoigh path, which we struck on An Lurg. A feeble blink of sun lit up the Garbh Allt as we descended into Strath Nethy,

but almost immediately thereafter the mist rolled down, and the last stage of our journey to Forest Lodge was accomplished in a downpour.

Archie was in waiting. We bundled into the car without ceremony, and in a short time hot baths and dinner claimed our attention. The cure was complete, and we returned next day to the common task, feeling that after all life was worth the living and the striving.