

ON THE KING'S HIGHWAY.

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From Crathie on the Dee, opposite Balmoral, to the Spey, near Grantown, is by the crow's flight a matter of some twenty miles, but by the route we propose to follow that distance becomes doubled. From modern aids to travel we mean to seek no help. Speed is not our first object—is, indeed, to be deprecated; therefore, we would not go by air if we could, and in our altitudes and on a road nigh a couple of centuries old, swept by winter floods, a car might prove but a precarious possession. Furthermore, we are here to enjoy this adventure to the full, and we have two days long ago marked on our calendar for the purpose. There is so much to see, so much to think of by the way, that a fleeting glance from a whirling car, giving no chance of a definite impression, would only madden us with the thought that the very things we had dreamt of finding here were eluding us. "These Hielan's of ours, as we ca' them," says the immortal Bailie, "are but a kind of wild warld by themselves, full of heights and howes, woods, caverns, lochs, rivers, and mountains, that it would tire the deevil's wings to flee to the tap o' them." Therefore, let our journey be on foot, and so shall we see what may be seen, and feel what may be felt. Let ear and eye be filled with the joy of things, and our very souls, seared in the market-place, be healed in the peace of God that rests amid the eternal hills.

So then, in the first freshness of an August morn, with a cheery adieu to our friends and hearts aglow with hope, we turn our backs on the Dee and breast the steep slope which in a few minutes brings us above the thousand-foot contour line. A backward glance shows us one of the most beautiful pictures that any Highland glen can present. A long stretch of valley, with the glorious Dee running through, jagged hills on either side with braes of pine and birch, Lochnagar towering in the southern background, the Castle, with the royal standard gently waving in the morning breeze.

Onward we go, rising steadily till Ben A'an and Beinn a' Bhuid stand out massively in front of us only a few miles to the north-west. A patch or two of snow in their deep corries, memorials of many an Arctic storm, remind us of their elevation. So we cross our first hill range and descend to the bridge at Gairnshiel. This bridge is a very striking example of what is usually called the "Wade" bridge; for we are travelling on one of those great military roads that bear the Marshal's name—surely no weak title to fame. Yet our bridge, though built on the Wade model, so to speak, came later, for our military road was made after the '45, after Wade's death in fact, whereas the roads known strictly as Wade's roads belong to the years before that black year.

From Gairnshiel we move forward steadily over some stiff gradients until we reach the watershed between Dee and Don, where by a copious stream of crystal-clear water, issuing from the hillside, we have time for a rest while we revel in the joyous sensations of our altitude, inhale deep draughts of the purest hill air, and feast our eyes on the wide expanse of hill and glen. Save for Lochnagar and Mount Keen away southward, we see no striking heights—only foothills of the great Cairngorm mass, but surely enough to make glad and uplift the heart of any man. We now descend into the upper reaches of the Don valley—a fat land, a land of sheep and kine; softly rounded hills, with heather blazing on this August day in such richness and such variety of tint as we have never seen elsewhere. In good time we reach Cock Brig, and lunch in that delightful wayside hospice, thus happily accomplishing the better half of the proposed day's march.

From Cock Brig the road rises very, very steeply; for what cared our soldier-engineers for gradient! Given hard ground, one or two "elbows" would get them over anything. Our soldier-engineers, we think, as we pant upwards, have always been terrible fellows; only the other day they took a railway up the Kyber. Our stiff upward pull is well rewarded. There to the west stand up in their splendid proportions and rugged strength, Ben Bynack, Cairngorm, Ben Macdhui, Beinn a' Bhuid, and Ben A'an, circling round

Loch A'an and its effluent stream, neither of which we can see, so deep in the gorges of the mountains do they lie. Reluctantly we turn our backs on the splendid scene and advance slowly by a fairly easy gradient to the top of the mountain pass, a full two thousand feet above sea level. On both sides the hills close in steeply, not with rugged rock, but green pasturage—more like border dales one would think. Not a tree or shrub, not a jutting rock to break the strange uniformity of those smooth, steep hillsides; a truly remarkable feature this Lecht Pass. Sometimes, as to-day, bathed in sunlight, oftener sombre with mist clouds billowing near, ever the wind sighs and moans and screams through it, ever there is the sound of falling waters, for months at a time deep in snowdrifts. At the top of the Pass we cross from the Don into the outlying edges of the drainage of the Spey. Far in front stretches the ribbon-like road, a mere track it seems on the hillside, descending, here slowly, there steeply, till we reach level ground. Turning sharply northwards, we find ourselves beside a fine hill well. The Soldiers' Well they call it. Rightly so, for the soldiers in their gratitude built in and about this well a protecting wall, and here, right in the centre, above the gushing streamlet, is an inscription, done in good lettering too, and, though the slab is broken across, easily decipherable. Here is the legend: "A.D. 1754. Five Companies of the 33rd Regt. The Rt. Honble. Lord Charles Hay Colonel made this road from here to the Spey." From "here to the Spey" means nearly twenty miles, and that was the section assigned to the 33rd Regiment. Would we had more of such inscriptions, telling us what other regiments with their Colonels made the other sections of this royal road that climbs so many hills, sinks down into so many valleys, and leaps so many torrent streams in the long way from Perth to Inverness and Fort George. As we meditate over this inscription, many thoughts come to us. We seem to feel the historical significance of the road on which we stand. The date, 1754—eight years after Culloden—recalls the social and political purposes to be served by opening up the Highlands. Our road appears to us complementary to that other great

military road built *before* the '45, which, starting from Perth and, following the Tay into Glen Tummel and Glen Garry, crosses into the Spey valley at Newtonmore and so to Inverness, thus skirting the western flank of the great central mountain mass of Scotland; our road, with the same beginning and ending, skirts the eastern flank of the central mass and links four valuable river systems—Tay, Dee, Don, Spey. Then we wonder whether the Colonel was that Lord Charles Hay who won imperishable fame with the Guards at Fontenoy ten years earlier. We shall discover that not so many years after 1754 the 33rd Regiment was to include among its officers a certain Arthur Wellesley, who commanded the regiment when the Tiger of Mysore was brought to bay in his lair at Seringapatam. Seringapatam is the first battle honour on the standards of the 33rd Regiment; their next is Waterloo, where the veterans of the regiment would have recognized the Duke of Wellington as their erst-while commanding officer. But, besides battle honours, there remains also this worthy memorial of the gallant 33rd Regiment—this section of the King's Highway "from here to the Spey."

From the Soldiers' Well the five miles to Tomintoul possess no scenic feature of special interest. We note the fine sheep pasturage and the comfortable homesteads. The village of Tomintoul, standing over 1,100 feet above the sea, deserves a chapter (which must here be missing) to itself. In its arrangement and general lay-out, the village shows manifest traces of the hand of the soldier-engineer of 170 years ago. Stretching for three-quarters of a mile along a wind-swept ridge, Tomintoul has resisted both the wild blasts of many winters and the vicissitudes of fortune, and to-day she has succeeded in accommodating herself to the new social and economic conditions that govern most villages in the Highlands.

On the morrow we resume our journey, and for a little while follow the pleasantly wooded valley of the Avon—the largest of the Spey's many mountain feeders. Crossing that beautiful stream, we encounter a series of elbowed gradients until we find ourselves on a great stretch of level

road running northwards, from which one obtains a magnificent view of the wide valley of the Spey. From here Cairngorm is seen at its best, bearing away south-west and seeming very near. From its base and stretching for many miles to the west are the great sombre pine forests for which the region is famous. Over the Spey, and northwards, is the long line of the Monadhliath range, not so imposing in rugged grandeur as the southward line of the Grampians, yet of massive strength and appearance. Decidedly we are at one of the Scottish view-points, and it is with much reluctance that we turn to follow our road which now descends slowly, following the windings of a stream which guides us to the Spey. The last three miles possess only a passing interest until we suddenly find ourselves in presence of the mighty river that sweeps along in headlong yet majestic career. At the bridge head we find it recorded that the task of the five companies of the 33rd Regiment had been completed. The village of Grantown, nestling among pines, is only a little more than a mile further on, and here we bid farewell to the King's Highway.

Fain would we follow its course westward and northward over the valleys of the Findhorn and the Nairn to its terminus, but it may not be yet awhile. But we have spent two glorious days on the Road ; we have seen some of the grandest mountain scenery in Scotland, and traversed three river basins ; we have noted with wonder and admiration the skill and the handiwork of the soldier-engineers, and conjured up visions of a long bygone time ; we have watched the lights and shadows chase each other from hill to hill and glen to glen, and all the while we have breathed untainted mountain air fragrant from the heather blossom ; for hardly ever, and only for brief spaces, in all our forty miles journey have we descended below the thousand-foot contour line. In these two days years have fallen from our shoulders, our eyes are brighter, our hearts gayer, and the red blood bounds in our veins ; with freer, lighter step we mingle with our fellows in the crowded places, carrying with us the memory of that track cut on the lonely hillsides of the North by the men of the 33rd Regiment.