

INDEPENDENCE.

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IN one's old age one sometimes ponders over many things that hitherto had not seemed of great importance and amongst others, the desires, the ambitions, and the restlessnesses of one's youth. When one is no longer young and looks at life from a different angle, why should it interest us ?

In the springtime, disquiet holds us ; we need wider horizons ; it is this urge that hurries us towards unknown experiences ; we want to be free and independent. Fortunately for some of us, if there is wild country near, this restlessness tempts us to wander there, partly to be away from the ordinary, everyday life and partly to be free. Although we do not know it, we are beginning to lay up the memories of happy days, remembrances of the years when, for us, the world was young, of the wide open spaces, the sunshine and the clouds, the streams and the sombre woods, the dark earth, mother of us all, that stretches into unknown lands, at last to lose itself in far-away, dreamy distances. We forget, for the time, the persistent round of daily happenings ; for the moment, we live in a new world, we have captured something that is our own, that is of our inward being, that will remain with us a possession of value and one that defies the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune."

It is these memories of our restless youth that, in old age, shine out with greater certainty than any of the events of later years. Well do I remember my first ascent of a real mountain. It was many years ago, in 1867, when I climbed the Hill of Fare. It was on a perfect summer day ; all the flowers were there to show that summer had come, the birds

everywhere busy with their nests. At the edge of the Glassel woods, I found a willow wren's nest full of eggs. From the top of the hill I had my first view of Lochnagar. The Corrichie burn was still running red in memory of that fierce fight in bye-gone days. Since then I have climbed many mountains, higher and more difficult, but the memories of those later climbs are not quite the same, part of the magic of youth is missing, the memory of them is more fleeting, not so vivid, some of the glamour has gone and, at last, the remembrances become more and more shadowy and are lost.

In those golden days of one's youth our mind receives impressions more readily than in our after life, and we need not fear that the realities will become shadows. Those who care to wander amongst wild mountains are indeed fortunate should they have near them a domain so full of beauty as the valley of the Dee. From the rugged solitudes of Ben Macdhui to the lower reaches of the River Dee, what other valley in Scotland can show so varied and so rich an environment? There can be found a far flung array of great hills, the highest in Scotland, spread over vast spaces; nestling in their corries, ancient pines still hold sway; the waters that are born in their fastnesses wander down over the moors to join their comrades, to form pools where the speckled trout lie and later to join the great river full of salmon. One has only to go to the Linn of Dee or the Falls of the Feugh to see them striving to win to the upper waters and the spawning beds.

In the summer time the Cairngorms can lead us ever onwards. The hills bathed in sunshine, the small burns have opened wide their doors as they wander through the heather, the curlews are calling across the low-lying land. But in winter all is changed; nearly all the bird life has gone; the deer are down in the glens, whilst, higher up, the winter gales hold high revel. If we go there, then we must indeed have a real knowledge of the hills, else the pitiless wind howling among the crags, the mist and the



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LOCHNAGAR: NORTH-WEST CORRIE

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driving snow, burying all in gloom, may at last overwhelm us. Many are the memories one can bring back from the mountains, some of peace and some of stern fights with the elements, but they are all memories of freedom. The restraint of ordinary life no longer holds us down, we are in touch with nature. The sky, the winds, the waters, and the earth, surely these ancient elements of life can teach us secrets that a more protected existence hides from us. In the old Gaelic lore that deals with a people whose daily world lay close to the earth, one sees how their passion for freedom is told in their poetry. It came from their intimate relation with nature. May we not also find contentment and a larger interest in life from friendly communion with the hills and the wide open spaces of our Highland land ?

There is enchantment hidden away amongst the lonely expanses of the wilds. Perhaps we have inherited a belief in it from our Gaelic ancestors. It is an enchantment that can give us a new knowledge, that, in old age, "life's leaden metal into gold transmutes." In our youthful days we were easily made captive by these magic spells, and can lay up for ourselves fairy treasures. They are treasures that are our own; we can safely keep what we have bought; we are independent as far as they are concerned. But in this modern civilization that becomes more and more complex, it is difficult to find any path that may lead us away from the all-embracing shackles of modern life. It is freedom and independence that we seek. Long ago the Greeks in their wisdom said, "Know thyself," a saying that means, "Be independent of external things." This independence, however, must not be used for ignoble desires. Rudyard Kipling has written, "A man may apply his independence to what is called worldly advantage, and discover too late that he laboriously has made himself dependent on external conditions, for the maintenance of which he has sacrificed himself, so, he may be festooned with all the haberdashery of success and yet go to his grave a castaway."