

## REMEMBERED SCENES.

A. LANDBOROUGH THOMSON.

WAR has made still more precious one's already treasured memories of mountain days. Many things combine to place the reality out of reach, but there is solace to be found in drawing upon a store of recollections. Only to a limited extent, however, can one hope to share this pleasure except with those who were actual companions. Such memories are personal, or held in common with a few: the pages of the private album must therefore be turned quickly for others.

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A home-made bivouac tent in the mouth of the Lairig Ghru. It was pitched on some sandy ground between the path and the Dee, just opposite the Devil's Point. Many must know the spot, for it made an obvious appeal to anyone coming from the road's end at Derry Lodge under a load of camp equipment and provisions for several days. It was used on more than one occasion by three youths, who found it a good centre for long days on the great hills which enclose the pass. It was there that they had their first intimate experience of the Cairngorms: the mountain birds too were of special interest to all of them.

An incident stands out. The morning mists rose slowly after a rainy night, and the streams hurried in spate. Cloud just capped the Devil's Point, when suddenly from the very summit—or so it seemed—a large boulder broke loose and came crashing down the steep eastern face. As it gathered force with each bound it also brought with it a growing avalanche of rocks and stones. The roar of the bombardment echoed from the hills as the falling rocks emerged more clearly from the mist. The camp was in the line of fire,

but happily out of range. Within a few moments the noise died down as the fall reached easier slopes at the bottom of the face. The smaller stones quickly came to rest, while the larger rocks hurtled for varying distances across the more level ground towards the river. Then all was quiet again but for the sound of running water.

*(This is a long cast back to years before the war of 1914-18, in which two of the companions gave their lives.)*

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Crossing the Alps into Italy. There was something romantic about this in one's young days when every experience was new. The incident formed part of the round known as the low tour of Mont Blanc, which provided a week of good walking with a brother. From the Rhone Valley one crosses from Switzerland into France by a green pass, the Col de Balme, and so down to Chamounix. Next day takes one round the western end of the great range at a low level; and the next across higher south-western spurs by three stony passes. Then a rough path leads over the Col de la Seigne, on top of which is the frontier sign, and descends into Italy by the Val de l'Allée Blanche—almost blocked by the moraine of the Miage Glacier and with the great southern faces of Mont Blanc and its neighbours towering immediately on the left.

From Courmayeur the most direct return route is over the Col Ferret, but we elected to take the sun-baked road to Aosta, with its immense backward view of Mont Blanc, and thereafter to cross to Switzerland again by the Great St Bernard. We did not stop with the carriage-folk at the hospice on the top, but went down to Bourg St Pierre to arrive after nightfall at the "Inn of the Breakfast of Napoleon the First."

*(This is another early memory from a time when it was possible for pedestrians to cross three frontiers unchallenged.)*

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The summit of Monte Rosa. Although the altitude is more than 15,000 feet above sea-level, yet on the morning

when two friends sat there in the sun, with their guide and porter, a match could be lit without shielding it from the wind. It was their first great peak, involving a climb which is laborious but not difficult. On the particular occasion it had been more strenuous than usual, by all accounts, because it had been undertaken too soon after bad weather. The new fall made heavy-going on the snowy slopes of the mountain; and during the scramble along the summit ridge—a great precipice on one side and an exceedingly steep slope on the other—it was necessary to push fresh snow from the holds. Half-way along, the guides exchanged yodels with a party attacking the Nordend, a subsidiary summit a mile away: later this party was seen to turn back, defeated by icy conditions on the steep final slope.

The view from the top remains in memory, with all the great mountains of the Pennine Alps standing clearly under a blue sky, and with little puffs of cloud rising below us from the warm valleys of Italy. One recalls especially how oddly stunted the neighbouring Matterhorn looked, seen from a superior height. A short hour and it was necessary to begin the descent, for the bad conditions had made us late. We had left the hut at 1 o'clock in the morning, and the afternoon was far spent before we could unrope.

*(The next summer was that of 1914, and it was seven years before Alpine experience could be renewed.)*

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A high snow-pass at dawn. As a particular instance memory picks out a honeymoon crossing of the Alphubeljoch, from Zermatt to Saas Fee. The night was spent at the little inn high up on the Täschalp, where we watched the last of the light on the sharp pyramid of the Weisshorn until the cold drove us indoors. Our guide had us early on the march, and we followed his lantern with no sound but the crunch of our footsteps and the gently tinkling bells of unseen cattle. Frost held the torrents in silent grip, and only occasionally a distant avalanche would roar for a moment and be still.

After an ascent over moraine, the surface of a glacier showed faintly in the first glimmer of light. The lantern was extinguished and the rope put on before we started across. On the far side a short scramble up a rib of rock took us to a higher and steeper glacier leading directly to the pass. Full dawn came as we breasted the final slope. Behind us a world of mountains shining in the morning sun above a sea of cloud which drowned the valleys. Before us, from the top, the new shapes of other mountains and the snowy glacier leading down towards our still hidden destination.

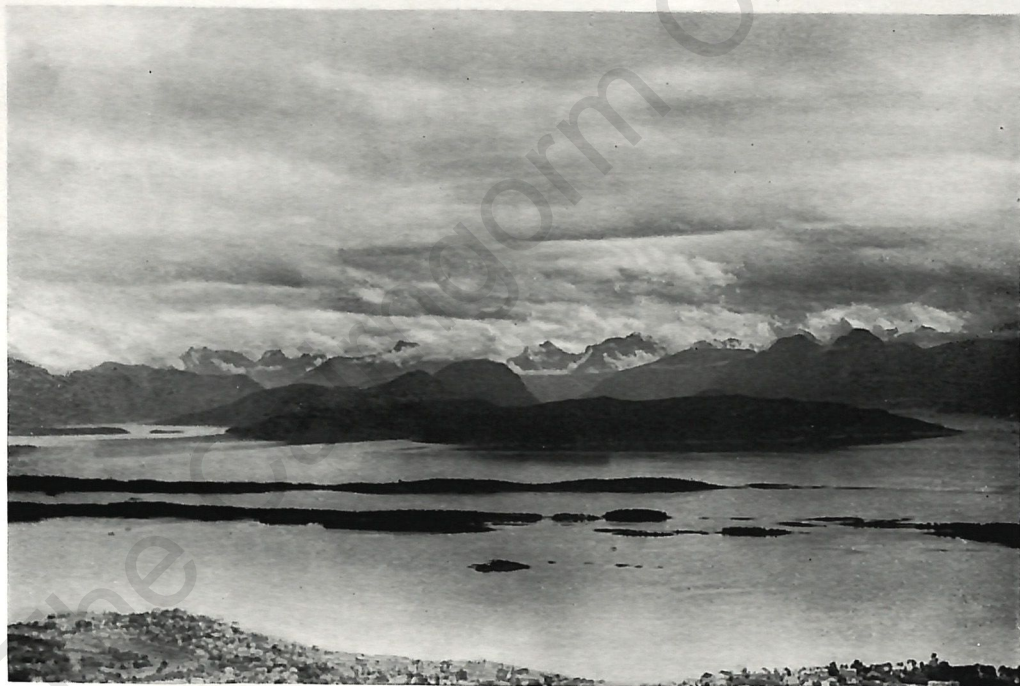
*(Such incidents are, of course, generic, and often repeated. It chanced, however, that it was sixteen years before we crossed back by another pass over the same ridge and so came again, but now from above, to the little inn on the Täschalp.)*

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Moine Mhor—the Great Moss. It is perhaps paradoxical that a hollow should be so impressive a feature of a mountain range. True, it lies at an altitude of nearly 3,000 feet, but it is surrounded by hills of which some rise more than 1,000 feet higher. It is indeed a strange remote place this wide green basin—feeding-ground of great herds of deer—in the heart of the Cairngorms.

In early days, when we approached the hills from Deeside, it was beyond our usual radius: we looked down into it from Cairn Toul or the slopes of Braeriach, and thought of it as the beginning of a westward land that must some day be explored. It was many years later, during a series of family holidays on Speyside, that we got to know it well. Our line of approach was from lower Glen Feshie and over the shoulder of Càrn Ban, from where we now looked eastwards over the hollow to the higher hills. And sometimes we crossed the Moss from there to one or other of these.

One rather strenuous day five of us spent in ascending Cairn Toul by this route. There are certainly easier ways of reaching that mountain, for the line we followed involved much heavy-going, with many subsidiary hollows and wide stretches of peat bog. We diverged to Braeriach on the way



ROMSDAL HILLS FROM MOLDE

*A. Landsborough Thomson*

back, and there a wet mist descended upon us. The return across the Moss, where in the morning it had been sunny, had then to be made against a fierce wind which lashed us with icy rain, while the limited visibility made it difficult to judge what progress we were making. We were glad at last to reach Càrn Ban and the steep path leading down to the glen, but, despite the discomforts, well pleased with our day.

In some other directions, however, the Moss may be traversed with pleasant ease—for instance, from Càrn Ban to the foot of Monadh Mòr. A walk that we did more than once was from Glen Feshie, over Càrn Ban and across the Moss to the head of the Eidart: thence down the Eidart to its confluence with the Feshie, and round the bend of that river to the starting-point. It is downhill all the way from Càrn Ban: we had the heights in the morning and the glens in the afternoon, with many glorious river pools offering discreet opportunities for a cooling swim. These were happy days, enjoyed in good company.

*(The party is now widely dispersed, the younger members—two nephews and a niece—in the Army.)*

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The Romsdal hills from Molde. Although from sea-level, this must surely rank as one of the great mountain views of the world. It has in superlative degree the charm of hills seen across water, and the prospect is wider than the angle of vision. No particular features stand out to claim special attention: the impression is rather of a tremendous horizon of endless mountains. In the morning they are shadowy with the sun behind them; the afternoon light picks out detail and lends variety; and as the long Norwegian evening fades they loom solidly as dark blue masses beyond the broad stretch of land-locked fjord.

We came to Molde first after a walking-tour from the Sogne Fjord, through the passes of the Jotunheim to the Geiranger Fjord, and thence by bus and ferry. That evening we found it difficult to leave the pier, which provides a promenade from which the view is uninterrupted. Next

day was spent idly in rowing to a wooded island for a bathe, and from there the panorama was nearer. Another time we arrived by sea from Bergen in heavy rain, and our fellow-passengers continued northwards two hours later, not knowing what they had missed. Happily we were stopping, on our way inland to the Dovrefjeld, and we awoke on the morrow to a brilliant view from our windows. Later we went up the steep hill behind: from its top we had a still wider outlook, with the little town at our feet.

*(To revisit a place once seen under perfect conditions is sometimes to court disappointment, but here the second impression matched the first.)*

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Over the hills to Torridon. This was the climax of a walking-tour which was accomplished, a few days at a time, in three successive Whitsun holidays. It began at Lochaline on the Sound of Mull, reaching Morar and Mallaig in the first season and Ardelve on Loch Alsh in the second. The route covered the chief part of the much indented west coast of Scotland that is not accessible by continuous roads. Most of the way led by hill-paths, and five sea lochs were crossed by boat.

The plan was nearing fulfilment by the time we reached Applecross in heavy rain, to find that the inn had been closed a week before. A cottage took us in, and next day was as fine as could be wished. The march was a short one, and it was without haste that we turned our backs on the sea, followed the little river upwards for a time, and then breasted a ridge of hill. A small cairn marked the crest of the faint track, and the view from this point is of surpassing merit for so low an elevation. Behind us was the shore we had left, with Skye across the water. Before us lay Loch Torridon, backed by the tremendous walls of Liathach and Ben Eighe.

Later, in the motor boat which had met us, we crossed the loch and passed through the narrows (of which Swinburne sang) into its inner reaches. We sailed over calm water among schools of guillemots and puffins that dived or flew



OVER THE HILLS TO TORRIDON

*A. Landsborough Thomson*



at our too near approach. The great hills were right above us as we made our landing.

*(The whole of the route indicated is for the moment subject to "prohibited area" restrictions, but it may be highly recommended for happier days.)*

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Breakfast on the Fletschhorn. It was a perfect morning of bright sunshine; the situation was magnificent; and a summit of over 13,000 feet had been reached after some hours of pleasant exercise. Now there was time to eat and drink at leisure, while enjoying a superb view from a sheltered platform facing southwards just below the top. Ours was the only party on the mountain that day—the writer, his niece, and their guides.

In youth one has the thrill of one's own first experience: in middle-age one may recapture something of this when introducing a young companion to the things one has learnt to value. A few mornings earlier we had wakened in the train while passing through the Juras. There was a first glimpse of the clean Swiss landscape—tidy little villages among green hills, with patches of wood and white bands of limestone cliff. Then there were a few hours to spare in Berne, with its arcaded streets and brilliant window-boxes; but the famous distant view of the Alps from the terrace above the Aar was obscured by haze.

So our first sight of the snow peaks was from the railway in the afternoon, when the Jungfrau showed clear above a wooded hill rising from the Lake of Thun. Then a nearer view of the Blumlisalp, when the train stopped at Kandersteg at the end of its steep climb to the mouth of the Lötschberg tunnel. Emerging on the other side of the range, we rattled down the gradient to the floor of the Rhone Valley. The night was spent at Brigue, after dinner out-of-doors in the warm darkness. Short journeys by train and bus next morning, and then a final hour's walk took us to our intended headquarters at Saas Fee. Here we were in the very midst of the great mountains, and after a couple of training walks were ready to go up to a hut for our first expedition.

Now we were at the top, and all the conditions were in favour of a memorable impression. The weather augured well for the rest of our holiday. Close before us was the Laquinhorn; behind it rose the Weissmies, a traverse of which was on the programme for the morrow.

*(This holiday ended with a high-level tour over the snow passes to Zermatt and Arolla, of which an account has previously been given.)*

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Beyond the Arctic Circle. The Swedish "tourist station" of Abisko lies in almost uninhabited country between the mountains of the Kebnekaise range and the great lake of Torneträsk. There is no road, but it may be reached by rail in a few hours from Narvik, after four days on the Norwegian mailboat northwards from Bergen.

One brings back from Lapland an impression of a summer landscape composed in many shades of blue; a picture in which colour and distance are everything and form counts for little. The many rivers and lakes are bright blue in the warm sunshine, the woods are blue-green, and the hills are dark blue in the distance under a light blue sky. The shapes of the hills are rounded like those of the Scottish Highlands, but there is never the red of heather slopes. There are few conifers too, the woods being mostly of sparse and stunted birch. Above the tree-level, at no great height, there is a thick scrub of juniper and willow bush: above that again, merely reindeer moss. Only the highest tops carry permanent snow or ice.

It was a "lemming year" and that provides our other most notable recollection. These amusing little rodents were in great abundance and very bold. Their fur is fawn and yellow and black in patches: their voice is a lusty squeak. The old ones could often be cornered among the stones or undergrowth, and the youngsters easily handled. Of the great migration which follows the periodical increase in numbers we unfortunately saw nothing.

*(This is a recent memory. Within two years Narvik, and other places on our journey there, had fallen into enemy hands.)*

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WEISSMIES RANGE FROM THE FLETSCHHORN

*A. Landsborough Thomson*

The southern slopes of Ben More Coigeach, running down steeply to the sea on the north side of Loch Broom. Off-shore lie the Summer Isles, dark jewels on the silver water. It is hard to say whether the view of the mountain from the sea, or that of the islands from the hillside, is the finer. During a family holiday at Ullapool various excursions had been made—by ferry and over the hill to Little Loch Broom; by motor launch to the isles; by car to a beautiful sandy bay from which can be seen the strange shapes of that sequence of isolated hills from Sulven to An Stac.

Three of us, the others being a niece and a nephew, set out to climb Ben More. We never seriously began to do so, for the day was warm, the start was late, and there had been unprofitable dispute over the line of approach. Very happily we turned the expedition into a coastal walk over a shoulder of the mountain. As we walked towards Achiltibuie—the very name is music—a calm sea was before us, with its islands near and far. Birds in flight gave movement to the scene, and there were some small ships like toys upon the water.

We came to a place where we could descend the cliffs to some big flat rocks at the edge of the sea. Our few clothes were soon off, and the soaring gulls might have seen our bodies slipping through the cool clear water. Refreshed by this memorable bathe in perfect surroundings, we ate our lunch on the rocks and rested awhile. Then we retraced our steps to the high road, walking towards the hills now lit by the westerling sun. We felt the glow of physical well-being; we had drunk deeply of the beauty of the world; we were at peace and content.

*(This was in 1939, ten days before the outbreak of the war that still seemed incredible. Next morning came the telegram of recall to London.)*