

## FOUR ELDERLY GENTLEMEN

THIS tale, anonymously told, touches in some small way on the activities of four moderately senior members of the Club, who, individually and collectively have been described in various terms, but in none more devastating than that used innocently enough by a rural lady of middle Deeside, of "Four elderly gentlemen." She was, of course, very rural and naturally very innocent.

What of these elderly ones who have quartered the hills and corries of Deeside and beyond, in good weather and in foul, in search of ski-able snow and companionship ?

Ewen must clearly be regarded as the No. 1, for only he had any pretensions to being a skier. He has, after all, been to Switzerland and is known to have in the course of a descent of Cairn Leuchan somersaulted through an arc of 360 degrees. It is true that the exercise was somewhat involuntary and that in some volubly explained but still unaccountable fashion he failed to maintain balance on completion of the circuit, but since none of the rest of the party ever reached, except very temporarily and mainly by mischance, a speed sufficient to change their course more than the 90 degrees or so involved in falling flat in any direction, his qualifications for the post are outstanding. Being a man of original and advanced ideas it is interesting, in view of present developments, to speculate on whether as a geographer he was making his personal contribution to the international geophysical year by making a really determined effort to get into orbit.

The party initially had implicit faith in his judgment as to the choice of areas suitable for the day's exercise, but, later, confidence waned slightly and there were even occasions when he was a great trial to all. After all, he knew the hills better than the rest; he knew just where the snow would be lying and the best way to get to it, so that if on occasion there was some slight doubt as to our exact location it was easy for us to accept the confidence with which, like the poet, "he gives to nothing an airy habitation and a name."

There were, however, occasions when fealty, friendship, and faith were strained to the limit; occasions when after slogging up never-ending slopes to the near vicinity of the promised land he would suddenly exclaim, almost it seemed with a hint of glee in his voice: "By God, chaps, it's the other side of the valley we should have been on to-day."

While "the other side" was frequently and fortunately too far away for anything to be done about it, there were dark days when it was close enough "to have a look at" and the dreary slog would begin again. There were terrible ones when the man was never satisfied; when there was always a possibility of better snow round some other corner; days when it was impossible to look with other than a jaundiced eye at the miserable patch of snow finally achieved and to remember, with any feeling other than regret, the wonderful ones that had been left behind earlier in the day. It was on such an occasion that one's reflections tended to dwell somewhat ruefully on the attractions of Bieldside Golf Course.

Thomson, justifiably enough, could be regarded as the gay adventurer of the party, a man prepared to try anything, even in the face of impending disaster, at least twice. He seemed to get away with it sufficiently often to instil a germ of admiration and perhaps also of envy in the hearts of the lesser members of the quartet. There were, of course, the more comforting occasions when he skied into utter and complete disaster, but you just had to admire the spirit of the man, for as a rule only exhaustion finally kept him down. He was not always a candidate for martyrdom, however, for should the weather and mood be right he was quite likely to curl up in some sunny corner and spend the day in reflective excursions into the philosophic and poetic arts.

Unforgettable is the occasion when, in an easy but masterly fashion, he used his powers of quotation, of exhortation, and even incantation to the full. He bullied, he praised, and he pled in an effort to cajole a smouldering collection of damp moss, green heather, and rotten wood into a reasonable state of igneous activity. Despite the undoubted merit of a prolonged oration which softened our hearts and which we felt was warm enough to melt even the mica schists of Craig Maskeldie, there was little response other than the production of vast clouds of a peculiarly viscous smoke. It was small reward for a wonderful effort, but Bain took advantage of the situation, at some personal discomfort, by allowing his clothing to become thoroughly saturated in the hope that he might be able on the homeward journey to compete in some small way with Duff's pipe.

Fearful of advancing age and brittle bones, Bain approaches the problem with caution rather than Ewen's casual aplomb or Thomson's gay abandon. A simple soul, he unprotesting follows his leaders in their every whim (they already being too far ahead to hear his protests anyway and unlikely to pay much attention if they

did), content to achieve some small measure of success in return for the labour and the knocks. The butt of his companions' humour, good or ill, he continues to ignore the situation and take what pleasures come his way. He has also been known on occasion to take some food.

What can be said about the last of the quartet, Taylor? A strange mixture, his friends know him as a determined man, an expert in the building of bridges and the control of water, yet the minute that water changes to snow and ice away goes his command, his confidence, his calm, and there he is, a broken man. How else can a man be described, who darkly and stealthily sells his ski? One must not be too hard on George, however, for undoubtedly he has had his moments, and who knows, they may come again as he gets younger. Moreover, we would not like to lose him entirely, for he brewed a beautiful brand of coffee, reserved as a rule for the end of the day. There was coffee in it, there was water in it, and there was rum in it. What the relative proportions were George kept to himself, but no clearer evidence of its effectiveness could be given than to report that at the finish of a desperate day in Glen Cluny, Gordon Matheson, after a couple of sips, stopped talking in approximately twenty-five seconds. The silence attracted attention in time to avert tragedy and the mug of coffee was safely recovered, though it was a near thing. By that time Matheson was fast asleep.

Now there are three more elderly gentlemen.