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RAIDERS COUNTRY

II.—WHAT WE SEE IN RAIDERLAND

The hills of Galloway lie across the crystal Cree as one rides northward towards Glen Trool, much as the Lebanon lies above the sweltering plains north of Galilee; a land of promise, cool grey in the-shadows, palest olive and blue in the lights. By chance it is a day of sweltering heat, and as we go up the great glen of Trool the midday sunshine is almost more than Syrian.

The firs' shadows in the woods fringing the loch about Eschonquhan are deliciously cool as the swift cycle drives among them. We get but fleeting glimpses of the water till we come out on the rocky cliff shelf, which we follow all the way to the farmhouse of Buchan. Trool lies much like a Perthshire loch, set between the granite and the blue-stone—the whin being upon the southern and the granite upon the northern side. The firs, which clothe the slopes and cluster thick about the shores, give it a beautiful and even cultivated appearance. It has a look more akin to the dwellings of men, and that aggregation of individuals which we call the world. Yet what is gained in beauty is more than lost in the characteristic note of untouched solitude which is the rarest pleasure of him who recognises that God made Galloway.

Trool is somehow of a newer creation, and the regularity of its pines tells us that it owes much to the hand of man. Loch Enoch, on the other hand, is plainly and wholly of God, sculptured by His tempests, its rocks planed down to the quick by the ancientest glaciers of 'The Galloway Cauldron.'

The road gradients along Trool-side are steep as the roof of a house. From more than one point on the road the loch lies beneath us so close that it seems as if we could toss a biscuit upon its placid breast. The deep narrow glen may be flooded with intense and almost Italian sunshine. But the water lies cool, solid, and intensely indigo at the bottom. Far up the defile we can see Glenhead, lying snug among its trees, with the sleeping giants of the central hills set thick about it. Nor it is not long till, passing rushing burns and heathery slopes on our way, we reach it.

Heartsome content within, placid stillness without as we ride up—a broad straw hat lying in a friendly way upon the path—the clamour of children's voices somewhere down by the meadow—a couple of dogs that welcome us with a chorus of belated barking—this is Glenhead, a pleasant place for the wandering vagabond to set his foot upon and rest awhile. Then after a time, out of the coolness of the narrow latticed sitting-room (where there is such a collection of good books as makes us think of the nights of winter when the storms rage about the hill-cinctured farm), we step, lightly following, with many expectations, the slow, calm, steady shepherd's stride of our friend—the master of all these fastnesses—as he paces upwards to guide us over his beloved hills.

It is warm work as we climb. The sun is yet in his strength, and he does not spare us. Like Falstaff, a fatter but not a better-tempered man, we lard the lean earth as we walk along. But the worst is already overpast when we have breasted the long incline, and find beneath us the still blue circles of the twin lochs of Glenhead. Before we reach the first crest, we pass beneath a great granite boulder, concerning which we are told a remarkable story. One day in autumn, some years ago, a herd boy came running into the

farmhouse crying that the day of judgment had come—or words to that effect. He had heard a great rush of rocks down from the overhanging brow of the crag - embattled precipice above. One great grey stone, huge as a cothouse, had been started by the heavy rains, and was coming downwards, bringing others along with it, with a noise like a live avalanche. The master saw it come, and doubtless a thought for the security of his little homestead crossed his mind. At the least he expected the rock to crash downward to the great dyke which protects his cornfields in the hollow. But the mass sank three or four feet in the soft turf of a 'brow,' and there to this day it remains embedded. A manifest providence! And the folk still acknowledge Providence among these hills—so behindhand are they!

As we mount, we leave away to the south the green, sheep-studded, sun-flecked side of Curleywee. The name is surely one which is given to its whaup-haunted solitudes, because of that most characteristic of moorland sounds—the wailing pipe of the curlew. 'Curleywee—Curleywee—Curleywee.' That is exactly what the whaups say in their airy moorland diminuendo, as with a curve like their own Roman noses they sink downward into the bogs.

Waterfalls are gleaming in the clefts—'jaws of water,' as the hill folks call them—the distant sound coming to us pleasant and cool, for we begin to desire great water-draughts, climbing upwards in the fervent heat. But our guide knows every spring of water on the hillside, as well as every rock that has sheltered fox or eagle. There, on the face of that cliff, is the apparently very accessible eyrie where nested the last of the Eagles of the southern uplands. Year after year they built up there, protected by the enlightened tenants of Glenhead, who did not grudge a stray dead lamb, in order that the noble bird might dwell in his ancient fastnesses and possess his soul—for surely so noble a bird has a soul—in peace. As a reward for his hospitality, our guide keeps a better understanding of that great Isaian text, 'They shall mount up with wings as eagles,' than he could obtain from any sermon or commentary in the round world. For has he not seen the great bird strike a grouse on the wing, recover itself from the blow, then, stooping earthwards, catch the dead bird before it had time to fall to the ground? Also he has seen the pair floating far up in the blue, twin specks against the supreme azure. Generally only one of the young was reared to eaglehood, though sometimes there might be two. But on every occasion the old ones beat off their offspring as soon as these could fly, and compelled their children to seek pastures new. Some years ago, however—in the later seventies—the eagles left Glenhead and removed to a more inaccessible rock-crevice upon the rocky side of the Back Hill o' Buchan. But not for long. Disturbed in his ancient seat, though his friends had done all in their power to protect him, he finally withdrew himself. His mate was shot by some ignorant scoundrel prowling with a gun, somewhere over in the neighbourhood of Loch Doon. We have no doubt that the carcass is the proud possession of some local collector, to whom, as well as to the original 'gunning idiot,' we would gladly present, at our own expense, tight-fitting suits of tar and feather.

Behind us, as we rise upwards into the realms of blue, are the heights of Lamachan and Bennanbrack. Past the side of Curleywee it is possible to look into the great chasm of air in which, unseen and far beneath us, lies Loch Dee.

We gain the top of the high boulder-strewn ridge. Fantastic shapes, carved out of the gleaming grey granite, are all about. Those on the ridges against the sky look for all the world like polar-bears with their long lean noses thrust forward to scent the seals on the floes or the salmon running up the Arctic rapids to spawn. To our right, above Loch

Valley, is a boulder which is so poised that it constitutes a 'logan' or rocking-stone. It is so delicately set as to be moved by the blowing of the wind.

Loch Valley and Loch Neldricken form, with the twin lochs of Glenhead, a water system of their own, connected with Glen Trool by the rapid torrential burn called the Gairlin, that flashes downward through the narrow ravine which we leave behind us to our left as we go upward. At the beginning of the burn, where it escapes from Loch Valley, are to be seen the remains of a weir which was erected in order to raise artificially the level of the loch, submerging in the process most of the shining beaches of silver granite sand. But the loch was too strong for the puny works of man. One fine day, warm and sunny, our guide tells us that he was working with his sheep high up on the hill, when the roar and rattle of great stones carried along by the water brought him down the 'screes' at a run. Loch Valley had broken loose. The weir was no more, and the Gairlin burn was coming down in a ten-foot breast, creamy foam cresting it like an ocean wave. Down the glen it went like a miniature Johnstown disaster, while the boulders crashed and ground together with the rush of the water. When Loch Valley was again seen, it had resumed its pristine aspect—that which it had worn since the viscous granite paste finished oozing out in sheets from the great cracks in the Silurian rocks, and the glaciers had done their work of grinding down its spurs and outliers. It takes a Napoleon of engineering to fool with Loch Valley.

From this point we keep to the right, passing the huge moraine which guards the end of the loch and effectually prevents a still greater flood than that which our master shepherd witnessed. These mounds are full of what are called in the neighbourhood 'jingling stones.' Without doubt they consist of sand and shingle, so riddled with great boulders that the crevices within are constantly being filled up and forming anew as the sand shifts and sifts among the stones. As we proceed the sun is shining over the shoulder of the Merrick, and we are bound to hasten, for there is yet far to go. Neldricken and Valley are wide-spreading mountain lakes, lying deep among the hills which spread nearly twenty miles in every direction. The sides of the glens are seared with the downward rush of many waters. Waterspouts are common on these great hills. It is no uncommon thing for the level of a moorland burn to be raised six or ten feet in the course of a few minutes. A 'Skyreburn' warning is proverbial in the south country along Solwayside. But the Mid Burn, and those which strike north from Loch Enoch tableland, hardly even give a man time to step across their normal noisy brattle till they are roaring red and it is twenty or thirty feet from bank to bank.

These big boulders, heaped up on one another, often make most evil traps for sheep to fall into. Sometimes it needs crowbars and the strength of men to extricate those that happen to be caught there. The dogs that range the hills, questing after white hares and red foxes, are quick to scent out these poor prisoners. These prison-houses are named 'yirds' by the shepherds. They are especially numerous on the Hill of Glenhead, at a place called Jartness, which overlooks Loch Valley. And indeed it is difficult anywhere to see a more leg-breaking place. It will compare even with that paragon of desolation, the Back Hill o' Buchan. It is understood in the district that when the Great Architect looked upon His handicraft and found it very good, He made a mental reservation in the case of the 'Back Hill o' Buchan.'

But our eyes are upwards. Loch Enoch is the goal of our desire. For nights past we have dreamed of its lonely fastnesses. Now they are immediately before us. Enoch is literally a lake in cloudland. Overhead frowns what might be the mural fortification of some titanic Mount Valerien or Ehrenbreitstein. The solemn battlemented lines rise

above us so high that they are only dominated by the great mass of the Merrick. It is hard to believe that a cliff so abrupt and stately has a lake on its summit. Yet it is so. The fortress-like breastwork falls away in a huge embrasure on either side, and it is into the trough which lies nearest the Merrick that we direct our steps. As we go we fall talking of strange sights seen on the hills. Our guide, striding before, stalwart and strong, flings pearls of information over his shoulder as he goes, and to the steady stream of talk the foot moves lighter over the heather. Beneath us we have now a strange sight—in a manner the most wonderful thing we have yet seen. On the edge of Loch Neldricken lies a mass of green and matted reeds—brilliantly emerald, with the deceitful brilliancy of a ‘quakin’ qua,’ or shaking bog, of bottomless black mud. In the centre of this green bed is a perfectly-defined circle of intensely black water, as exact as though cut with a compass. It is the Murder Hole, of gloomy memory. Here, says the man of the hill, is a very strong spring which does not freeze in the hardest winters, yet is avoided by man and beast. It is certain that if this gloomy Avernus were given the gift of narration it would tell of lost men on the hills, forwandered and drowned in its dark depths.

The Merrick begins to tower above us with its solemn head as we thread our way upward towards the plateau on which Loch Enoch lies. We are so high now that we can see backward over the whole region of Trool and the Loch Valley basin. Behind us, on the extreme south, connected with the ridge of the Merrick, is Buchan Hill, the farmhouse of which lies low down by the side of Loch Trool. Across a wilderness of tangled ridge-boulder and morass is the Long Hill of the Dungeon, depressed to the south into the ‘Wolf’s Slock’—or throat. Now our Loch Enoch fortress is almost stormed. Step by step we have been rising above the rugged desolations of the spurs of the Merrick.

‘Bide a wee,’ says our guide, ‘and I will show you a new world.’ He strides on, a very sturdy Columbus. The new world comes upon us, and one of great marvel it is. At first the haze somewhat hides it—so high are we that we seem to be on the roof of the Southern Creation—riding on the rigging of all things, as indeed we are. Half-a-dozen steps and ‘There’s Loch Enoch!’ says Columbus, with a pretty taste in climax.

Strangest sight in all this Galloway of strange sights is Loch Enoch—so truly another world that we cannot wonder if the trouts of this uncanny water high among the hills decline to wear tails in the ordinary fashion of common and undistinguished trouts in lowland lakes, but carry them docked and rounded after a mode of their own.

This still evening Enoch glows like a glittering silver-rimmed pearl looking out of the tangled grey and purple of its surrounding with the strength, tenderness, and meaning of a human eye. The Merrick soars away above in two great precipices, whereon Thomas Grierson, writing in 1846, tells us that he found marks showing that the Ordnance surveyors had occupied their hours of leisure in hurling great boulders down into the loch. There were fewer sheep on the Merrick side in those days, or else the tenant of that farm might with reason have objected. It seems, however, something of a jest to suppose that this heathery desolation is really a farm, for the possession of which actual money is paid. Yet our guide tells of an old shepherd, many a year the herd of the Merrick, who, when removed by his master to the care of an easier and lower hill, grew positively homesick for the stern majesty of the monarch of South Country mountains, and related tales of the Brocken spectres he had often seen when the sun was at his back and the great chasm of Enoch lay beneath him swimming with mist.

Loch Enoch spreads out beneath us in an intricate tangle of bays and promontories. As we sit above the loch, the large island with the small loch within it is very prominent. The ‘Loch-in-Loch’ is of a deeper and more distinct blue than the general surface of Loch

Enoch, perhaps owing to its green and white setting upon the grassy boulder-strewn island. Another island to the east also breaks the surface of the loch, and the bold jutting granite piers, deeply embayed, the gleaming silver sands, the far-reaching capes so bewilder the eye that it becomes difficult to distinguish island from mainland. It increases our pleasure when the guide says of the stray sheep, which look over the boulders with a shy and startled expression: 'These sheep do not often get sight of a man.' Probably no part of the Highlands is so free from the presence of mankind as these Southern uplands of Galloway, which were the very fastness and fortress of the Westland Whigs in the fierce days of the Killing.

On the east side of Loch Enoch the Dungeon Hill rises grandly, a thunder-splintered ridge of boulders and pinnacles, on whose slopes we see strewn the very bones of creation. Nature has got down here to her pristine elements, and so old is the country, that we seem to see the whole turmoil of 'taps and tourocks'—very much as they were when the last of the Galloway glaciers melted slowly away and left the long ice-vexed land at rest under the blow of the winds and the open heaven.

Right in front of us the Star Hill, called also Mulwharchar, lifts itself up into the clear depths of the evening sky—a great cone rounded like a hayrick. At its foot we can see the two exits of Loch Enoch—the true and the false. Our guide points out to us that the Ordnance Survey map makes a mistake with regard to the outlet of Loch Enoch, showing an exit by the Pulsraig Burn at the north-east corner towards Loch Doon—when as a matter of fact there is not a drop of water issuing in that direction, all the water passing by the northwest corner towards Loch Macaterick.

Beyond the levels of desolate, granite-bound, silver-sanded Loch Enoch lies a tumbled wilderness of hills. To the left of the Star is the plateau of the Rig of Millmore, a wide and weary waste, gleaming everywhere with grey tarns and shining 'Lochans.' Beyond these again are the Kirreoch hills, and the pale blue ridges of Shalloch-on-Minnoch. Every name is interesting here, every local appellation has some reason annexed to it, so that the study of the Ordnance map—even though the official nomenclature enshrines many mistakes—is weighted with much suggestion. But no name or description can give an idea of Loch Enoch itself, lifted up (as it were) close against the sky—nearly 1700 feet above the sea—with the giant Merrick on one side, the weird Dungeon on the other, and beyond only the grey wilderness stretching mysteriously out into the twilight of the north.

It is with feelings of regret that we take leave of Loch Enoch, and, skirting its edge, make our way eastward to the Dungeon Hill, in order that we may peer down for a moment into the misty depths of the Dungeon of Buchan. A scramble among the scree, a climb among the boulders, and we are on the edge of the Wolfs Slock—the appropriately named wide throat up which so many marauding expeditions have come and gone. We crouch behind a rock and look downward, glad for a moment to get into shelter. For even in the clear warm August night the wind has a shrewd edge to it at these altitudes. Buchan's Dungeon swims beneath us, blue with misty vapour. We can see two of the three lochs of the Dungeon. It seems as if we could almost dive into the abyss, and swim gently downwards to that level plain, across which the Cooran Lane, the Sauch Burn, and the Shiel Burn are winding through 'fozy' mosses and dangerous sands. It is not for any man to venture lightly at nightfall, or even in broad daylight, among the links of the Cooran, as it saunters its way through the silver flow of Buchan. The old royal fastness keeps its secret well.

Far across in the distance we can see the lonely steading of the Black Hill o' the Bush, and still farther off the great green whalebacks of Corscrine and others of the featureless Kells range, deepening into grey purple with a bloom upon them where the heather grows thickest, like the skin on a dusky peach.

Now at last the sun is dipping beyond the Merrick, and all the valley to the south, or rather the maze of valleys, grow dim in the shadow. Loch Enoch has turned from gleaming pearl to dusky lead, or, more accurately still, to the dull shimmer that one may see on so unpoetical a thing as cooling gravy. So great are the straits of comparison to which the conscientious artist in words is driven in the description of scenery. But we must turn homeward. The Merrick itself is dusking. Enoch falls behind its hummocks of iceworn rocks. We descend rapidly into the valley which leads to Loch Neldricken, threading our way till we come to the grave of the wanderer Cameron, who lost his road and perished in a storm alone upon the waste. The form of the body is still plainly to be seen upon the emerald turf, and certainly the boulders around give good evidence of the power of the winter storms. Our guide, with his strong hill voice, tells us of these times of fear, when winter sends the spindrift of the snow hurtling across the mountains. The storms here are rarely fatal to many sheep, partly because it is the office of the shepherd to keep an eye upon the places where the sheep are collected, but still more because of a very wonderful piece of special adaptation. It is not upon these rough hills of boulder and heather that many sheep are lost. Smoother hills are far more dangerous. The overlapping rocks, tossed and set in fantastic congeries of crags, seem to suck in the snow automatically. The granite blocks, lying all around, give shelter, and as it were provide a thousand dustbins, into which the wind, careful and untiring housemaid, sweeps the snow almost as it falls. At least, since the 'close cover' of the famous 'sixteen drifty days,' there has been recorded here no great or widespread loss of the black-faced sheep—the current coin of the hills.

Presently we are skirting the 'silver sand' of Loch Neldricken, which, as our guide says, would be good scythe sharpening, were it not that so much better can be got at Loch Enoch. For from these uplands the 'straikes' of the lowland scythes are supplied with the pure flinty granite sand which puts an edge upon the blades that cut the hay and win the golden corn. Emery straiques are used for easy corn by some newfangled people who are ill to satisfy with the good gifts by Nature provided. But the stalwart men who mow in the water meadows know well that nothing can put the strident gripping edge upon their blade like the true Loch Enoch granite sand.

It is dusking into dark as we master the final slope, and to the barking of dogs, and the cheerful voices of kindly folk, we overpass the last hill dyke, and enter the sheltering homestead of Glenhead, which looks so charmingly out over its little crofts down to the precipice-circled depths of Loch Trool.

Ere we came over the hill, however, we entered the sheep 'buchs,' a very fortress of immense granite blocks, set upon a still more adamant foundation of solid rock—a monument of stern and determined workmanship. Indeed, something more than sheep bars are needed to restrain the breed of sheep that is to be found hereabouts—animals that by no means conduct themselves like slow-going and respectable Southdowns or alder manic Cheviots, but fight like Turks, climb like goats, and run like hares. We remember taking a newly-imported Englishman over a Galloway hill. We were climbing in the heat, when suddenly, with a rush, a fearsome animal, with twisted horns half a yard long, and a black and threatening face, rose behind us, leapt a wide watercourse and disappeared up the precipice, amid a rattle of stones scattering downward from its hoofs.

‘What wild beast is that?’ asked our companion in some trepidation.

‘A Galloway tip,’ we replied.

‘And what might a ‘tip’ be, when he’s at home?’

‘Only a sheep,’ we replied calmly.

The Englishman, accustomed to the breed of Leicester, looked at us with a curious expression in his eyes.

‘If I were you I would not try to take in an orphan—and one far from home,’ he said. ‘We English may be verdant, but at least we do know a sheep when we see one.’

And to this day he does not believe it was ‘only a sheep’ that he saw on our slopes of granite and heather.

As we lay asleep that night, the sound of the wind drawing lightly up and down the valleys breathed in upon us, and the subtle smell of honey came to us in the early morning from the ranged beehives under the wall. Around was a great and sweet peace—pure air refined by heather and the wild winds—content so perfect that we wished to live for ever with the chief guide and his partner divided between the travail of writing and the rest of reading.

But it is morning over Glen Trool. The light has poured over from the east, flooding the valley. But there is a mist coming and going upon Curleywee. Lamachan hides his head. Only the ‘taps’ towards Loch Dee are clear.

We are out amid the stir of the farmyard with its pleasant familiar noises.

‘D’ye see yon three stanes on the hill atween it and the sky?’ asks the Man of the Hills.

‘We see them,’ we reply, making out three knobs upon the ultimate ridges.

‘Weel, yon’s your road for Loch Dee, but you’ll hae to gang a guid bit back.’

He is right—the canny Galwegian—Loch Dee is over there, but it certainly is a ‘guid bit back.’

It was easier to get the direction of the three silent watchers on the hill crest than to keep straight for them over the tangle of heather and moss which lies between.

The way to the loch seems to be over the white granite bed of a burn that comes down from the rugged sides of Craiglee. Following it we reach the high and precipitous side of the hill, and follow the burn up to the ‘lirk of the hill’ where the streamlet takes its rise. This burn, which comes over the white rocks in sheets in wet weather, is named the Trostan. Near the summit of Craiglee lies a little loch, high up among the crags—called the Dhu Loch; sombre, dark, and impressive. From the jutting point of rock, called the Snibe, which looks towards the north, we see the great chasm of the Dungeon from the south. We can catch the glint of the Dungeon Lochs far to the north—all three of them—while nearer the Cooran Lane and other burns seek their ways through treacherous sands and ‘wauchie wallees’ to Loch Dee, which lies beneath us to the south. Seen from the Snibe, Loch Dee looks its best. It has indeed no such remarkable or distinctive character as the splendid series of lochs between Glenhead and Enoch. It would be but a wild sheet of water on a featureless moor, were it not that it derives dignity from the imminent sides of Craiglee and the Dungeon.

We reach the bottom by a narrow cleft that leads downwards from the Snibe towards the loch. It is called the Clint of Clashdaan. Then comes a wading wetfoot through some boggy land grazed over by sheep (which must surely be born web-footed), till we reach the boathouse on the western shore of Loch Dee. Beyond is a strip of sand so inviting and delightful to the feet that in a few moments we are swimming across the narrows of the loch. Then follows a run on the beach in costume which might occasion

some remark on Brighton beach, and a brisk rub down with the outside of a rough coat of Harris tweed in lieu of a towel. In a few minutes the steep sides of Curleywee are bringing out a brisk reaction of perspiration. It had been our thought that from Curleywee it might be possible to obtain a general view of the country of the Granite Lochs, but the persistent downward sweep of the mist makes this impossible. Yet by persevering along the verge we have some very striking glimpses down into the deep glen of Trool, at the upper end of which lie cosily enough the farmhouses of Buchan and Glenhead. High up on the side of Curleywee, where the whaup are crying the name of the mountain, like porters at a railway station, we come upon two or three deep little pools in which the trouts are rising. How they get up there is a question which others must settle. There they are, and there for us they shall stop. If they got up the 'jaws' which come pouring over the side of the hill somewhat farther down, they are certainly genuine acrobats—the descendants of some prehistoric freshwater flying-fishes.

As soon as we leave the ridge above, it is downhill steeply all the way till we come to hospitable Glenhead, where by the burn the warm-hearted master is working quietly among the sheaves. It does one good in the turmoil of the world to think that there are kind souls living so quietly and happily thus remote from the world, with the Merrick and the Dungeon lifting their heads up into the clouds above them, and over all Loch Enoch looking up to God, with a face sternly sweet, only less lonely than Himself.