Cycling in the Highlands

By Professor Ives—No. III.

Fitz had become possessed of a great yearning to reach Skye. The road, we were told, lay directly towards the island, but not, however, so directly as to be free from difficulties. In addition to the rain we had still a strong head wind to face, so I suggested hiring a farmer's cart and lying down therein for the greater part of the way. The idea would not be many miles, so we continued riding for a bit. Then the first hill was reached, and our slavery began. It was no use; we could not rest, nor could we be at those machines over a road never made for cycling, while the wind increased in violence with every hill. At last, to make matters worse, a flock of sheep was turned out, and its force absolutely stopped us, and a friendly shepherd, catching us up, good-naturedly hooked his crook on my machine, and drew me back. Thereupon, as I had thus, pulling one and pushing the other, assisted us over the crest. How it blew on that ridge, and how we hugged the inside of the track so as not to be blown over the cliff! Worst of all, we had to walk down the other side, the road being quite unrideable. But the good shepherd trudged along with us, each of us telling the other how much worse the next hill would be.

Glenelg was reached at last, and we learned that there was a steamer leaving for Skye that afternoon, so we elected to go by it. In the meantime we sheltered in a crofter's cottage. When we entered the parlor, one table, one bed, two broken chairs, an old clock (stopped), and an open peat fire. Here, sharing the room, we met the wife and six children, who, on this wretched day, were going about barefooted, and on the faces of two of whom could be read the terror of the storm, the fear, the grand enemy. Death. How they existed I know not. Their food, we learned, was chiefly oatmeal porridge and such milk as a wretched cow provided for our sole use. They are as poor as poverty that everything bespoke! What a romance the novelist could weave out of this! How often I have dreamed of such a story in which she gave us—a story of a short-life of service in a Scotch town, the atmosphere of which did not agree with her health; of a return to the people of whom she knew, and who only added more burdens of want to both; and of a struggle with sickness and poverty in their worst forms, without hope of improvement means.

When the steamer arrived it was so stormy that the boatmen would not attempt to take us in. We therefore walked to the pier. So we wheeled through the rain to Kyle-Rhea Ferry, and at last got over to Skye, and through a valley whose desolate and dreary aspect made our hearts sick, and over the terrible hill—and well, I don't like to think of all we went through that day, and I'll say no more about it. Our sufferings were not last. By the time we reached Broadford more dead than alive. And as this Skye trip was all Fitz's foolish idea, I didn't enjoy it in the least. I lay awake next morning I framed a solemn resolution. Hitherto my easy-going, genial disposition had permitted my companion to do as he pleased, but this will not do any longer. From that day my good nature had been imposed upon in consequence. But "even a worm will turn," so when he addressed me at breakfast with a face of thunder that would terrify a black bear, I took him up, bare ears, and banks of steam. For all is rocks at random thrown, bare claws, and bars of steam. I told him that I had been far enough to have seen enough of gloom and desolation; that it was quite time we took a second look at the region, and he was at last brought to reason.
weave up training in the direction of Greenock, and then towards civilised districts; that I, at any rate, was not prepared to be left; and that we had better get across to the other side of Scotland, away from this wet, windy weather, and then we should be more likely to hear from the British. I was glad to find that my arguments bore fruit, so we left Skye with some reluctance, regret, crossed the Strome ferry on the steamers, and then arrived in Inverness. We disembarked at Loch Garten, where I got off my machine unsuccessfully chasing a young squirrel, and nearly got caught trespassing by a gamekeeper. It was a little troublesome to get transportation for poaching. Strathpeffer, the Spa of Scotland, with its well-plantated streets, its mineral springs, and its fine homes, was a resort to which I preferred not to proceed. Finally Inverness was reached at 10 p.m. in broad daylight, with dry clothes, both of us feeling sleepy for further riding. I must not forget to mention a splendid view of Cromarty Firth, then Kessock, where we took a wrong turning and went into the wood. It was a position from which we could not get near Garve, which we had stopped to photograph, and which, unlike many other so-called falls about which guidebooks rave, is a true Falls. At supper Finlay said,

"The geological structure of the greater part of this district through which we have ridden to-day is metamorphic rock, consisting chiefly of gneiss and mica-slate, with granite, porphyry, and trap-rock balances."

I said, "I beg your pardon." He repeated the observation. Then I looked at him in a pitying sort of manner, and went on, "It's an old-commerce rock, but the old commerce is not a character, and that I wished to preserve it, and that I trusted that he would not use more language of that kind in my presence."

The tour was composed of a geol., a modern cathedral, a town hall, some fine hotels, and other famous Scots. We then connected with its history. Six miles out I found the battle of Prince Charlie were finally extinguished—a bleak bit of moorland enclosed by a circle of trees. Our guide-books told us that the spot was marked, but we could not find where the highlanders were buried together in clumps. But the mounds have sunk to the level of the ground, and not the least mark remains where the great battalions fell fighting for their prince and country, April 27, 1746.

For some time we wandered amidst these sad memorials of bravery and devotion. After some time we found the cairns, placed some of the gorries, and went sadly off on our way. Inverness, musing on the strangeness of man. Finlay had shown me in an old, coarse manner, and I closed up with it. I'd die as fit as Charlie.
That afternoon we went out to take views of the lovely little islands in the river above Inverness, and out to Tom-na-hourish (Hill of the Fairies), Fitzjames telling me on our way the origin of the name. It seems that in the old days of fairies and enchantments, this was the spot, and used to bring earth on their backs and pile it here until a great hill was formed, on the summit of which they delighted to hold their midnight revelries. The hill is now overgrown with dark pine-trees, but you can still see the circle of stones surrounding the cemetery at its base. That night we went to a Gaelic concert in the Town Hall. The room was draped with all kinds of tartans, relieved by door-hoods and antlers. A patriarchal Highlandman with long white beard and long walrus moustache, introduced the various performers. Highlanders in full kilts played bagpipes and others danced the Highland fling, the sword, and other dances, while songs, violin and piano solos, and a Gaelic speech occupied the rest of the programme. Some of the songs were in Gaelic, some in English. A fair maid of some forty summers amused her hearers by singing:

"I'm owre young, I'm owre young, nae fang to rae a sin."
"I'm owre young, twa is a sin.
To tak' me frae mae munnin yet."

The last line in particular seemed to tickle the audience; and the manner in which it was delivered consisted of a singing of Scotch dances, but imagine my surprise when five men and a boy, all dressed in black, stood up to play the item announced as a "violon solo." Five played violins and one a double bass. There was a grand piano, and a number of strathspey reels and other dances, while the man with the bass solemnly scraped out a sort of Faux-bourdon or drone bass, in which consecutive fifths played an important part. How droll it sounded, and yet the Scots believe in it, and the music is written for it. Their feet upon the floor in quite an excited manner. Then the Gaelic speech—how funny it was, and what a rich vein of humour the speaker had, or seemed to have, for I don't understand Gaelic! But the audience laughed often and loud, and I suppose they understood English. In the reserved seats I saw the shepherd who had helped us with his crook on that high hill near Skye. Was he a shepherd, I began to wonder, or was he a Highland chieftain who had travelled so far to the concert? A mere shepherd could not afford to do this.

Some kinds of people are never satisfied with their positions. Here we were in a decent civilized city, with good hotels, battlefields, and concerts all handy, and yet I remember I was telegraphing early next morning for Blair Athol, through Oban to Kisimul, Killiecrankie, on to Perth, thence to Edinburgh, Stirling, and Glasgow. I asked what time the train started for these places and what the fare would be. He replied that we could go by the night train, and then by bicycle, "of course." Then I spoke to him perfectly but impressively, and told him that even in my childhood the greatest care had been to bring me safely up to man's estate, that the family physician often warned me that too much bicycle might bring on heart disease, and that I was likely to be turned over to some consideration. This led to a discussion, but finally we made a compromise and started by next morning's steamer for Fort Augustus and thence we were to go by bike if the weather permitted.

I imagine that the scenery from the Gondolier boat was steaming down the Caledonian Canal would be very fine in rainy weather. We did not have any. Before we had gone very far along Loch Ness the wind blew quite a hurricane and was so cold that, having no greatcoat, we had to put on our overcoats and still be frozen. The wind was not even visible.