

## TWO DAYS IN GLEN MUICK.

BY WILLIAM SKEA.

To view aright the beauties of "Dark Lochnagar" one must climb Cairn Bannoch. This opinion is supported by several well-known mountaineers who have written on Lochnagar, and, indeed, it was by their advice that at eight in the morning of the third of June the writer set out alone to make the discovery. The programme mapped out for the day was as follows:—"From Inschnabobart to Spital of Muick, Loch Muick side to the Black Burn, Broad Cairn, Cairn Bannoch, Fafernie, Tolmount, Glen Doll, Glen Clova, cross the Capel Mounth, back to Inschnabobart". But, as sometimes happens with the best-laid schemes, this one went "agley". The weather seemed unfavourable to far seeing. A heat haze hung about the hill-tops, and balloon-like clouds rolled up from the south-west. After passing Lochend shooting-box our mind was made up to first see how things looked from the Capel Mounth. We ascended on the left bank of the first burn, on Loch Muick side, to the two thousand feet plateau, where, it is said (and we are inclined to think it quite possible), one may drive in a dog-cart for hours without danger to the springs!

This plateau, though for the most part grassy, has bog for subsoil. Where the grass of the plateau is broken—and where is it not?—the moss is laid open, frequently to considerable depths. Fortunately, even at the date mentioned, the continued drought was beginning to tell on these high grounds, and so it was quite easy to pass dry-shod over most of the moss holes. One never dreams of malaria up on the hill-tops, and these brown and black mosses are not without interest. Their margins are haunted by birds and other living creatures, while their interiors contain the contorted remains of what we presume may be called part of the ancient Caledonian forest. These remains crop out in great variety; and of their antiquity there can be little doubt.



The view from the Capel Mounth was not propitious. Clouds possessed the glens south and west, and rain was apparently falling in Glen Clova. Eastward there was a view of the hills about Glen Mark and Glen Lee, while in the north-east Mount Keen was distinctly outlined. Lochnagar, in the north, was well seen all day, although the heat-haze blurred the sharpness here and there during the forenoon. The west was black in the distance, nothing like a good view being obtained beyond the Clunie hills and Glas Maol. This was not encouraging.

The day was young, however, and we set our face to the westward, taking the tops of "the Hillocks"—the Dog (2400) and the Sandy (2511)—in our route. From the latter we fetched a bee line to the Broad Cairn, tacking right and left to avoid the lagoons that feed the Black Burn. As we passed on to the apron of the hill, Glen Doll vomited up a heavy cloud, and during a brief shower we took shelter and luncheon in the lee of one of the huge blocks of stone which nature, in some of her "wooden dreams", has left on the side of the Broad Cairn.

We ascended to the cairn (3268) in fine weather. The only living creature visible on the summit was a brown hare, which refused to run from us beyond a dozen yards. From Broad Cairn on a clear day the view is very interesting and far-reaching, among the sights being the Bell Rock Lighthouse. From the south-western shoulder we looked down upon the leafy surroundings of Bachnagairn, and had a peep of the Doll.

An hour and a half after leaving Broad Cairn, we stood by the stony pinnacle of Cairn Bannoch (3314). This view was the jewel of the day's outing, an outing which was pleasant from first to last. The White Mounth (*i.e.* Lochnagar), now in sharp outline, loomed up before us in the north, in the light and shadow of the afternoon sun. At our feet lay the Dubh Loch, black and still as death. The grim lofty precipices which surround the loch give an eerie and awful aspect to the place. From this wild corner of the Royal Highlands there stretches out towards the north-east one of the most fascinating scenes in Britain—we mean the



valley of the Muick. From the grand old rocks beside us, to the quaint brown Coyles, which shut in the view at the Dee end of the glen, a brilliant panorama of mountain and flood unfolds itself—the White Mounth on yonder side, the Black Mounth on this. The valley between the Dubh Loch and Loch Muick, though wild in the extreme, is picturesquely clad with birches, among which wimples and pours the Allt an Dubh-loch. At the lower end of this rocky defile the eye is again delighted with the Glasallt Shiel in its fresh setting of shaggy larches—an oasis in a desert, a gem of royal beauty. In the middle of the picture Loch Muick stretches out its black waters, the blackness being intensified by the many long narrow beaches of yellow sand which gild the fretted margin. After scanning with admiration the bold hillsides which rise suddenly from the shores of the loch, the eye returns to the “frowning glories” of the Dubh Loch, and only the knowledge of the flight of time, and the memory of the “lang Scotch miles” that lie between us and our temporary habitation, can persuade us to retrace our steps.

On our way back to Glen Muick by the Bachnagairn path we explored the two magnificent corries which descend into Loch Muick opposite the Glasallt Shiel, both of them wild and romantic. From the top of these fine corries a grand view is obtained of the Glasallt Falls, behind the Shiel, where the burn, in its precipitous descent from the top of Lochnagar, leaps down in one white straight streak a distance of two hundred feet or more.

But the loch itself is full of interest. Its sides are rich in flowering plants and ferns, while its waters teem with trout. Besides some of the commoner waterfowls, we watched the ways of the ouzel and the heron. In the evening a large flock of wild geese visited the loch, causing quite a flutter among the collies, and we were told of the doings of a black-throated diver that day while we were absent on the mountain tops.

On the following morning—now “the glorious *fourth* of June” of our calendar—we set out for Lochnagar, the party now mustering five. The writer was the only man of



the party who had not previously ascended the mountain from this side, so that his experience of the expedition was fresh and fraught with new pleasures. All the other hillmen present "knew the ropes", as the sailors say. Two of them are familiar with, and possess special knowledge of, the mountain and its surrounding views. This was consequently a red-letter day in the writer's mountaineering experience.

After passing the Gelder and Glasallt paths, we left the path which ascends "the Ladder" and struck away to the right. We made tracks for the cairn on the side of the Meikle Pap which marks the spot where the late Prince Consort killed his last stag. The cairn, which bears the inscription "Albert, 18th Oct., 1861", stands at an altitude of 2500 feet, in ground of the roughest mountain top kind. From this height the view to north and east may be said to begin in earnest. The same may be said of the ascent!

Between the Prince's Cairn and the top of the Meikle Pap our party halted thrice—nominally to admire the gradually expanding view, but really to cool down. The weather was warm. There had been a heavy shower as we passed Alltnaguibhsaich Lodge, and the indications augured more showers. Fortunately there was a breeze from the south-west which cleared the valley of the Dee, the clouds being still high. Nevertheless, we encountered a heavy, but brief, shower of rain as soon as we reached the Meikle Pap cairn (3211). The two knowing ones of the party found here a pleasurable surprise for their companions. The Meikle Pap possesses the most remarkable "cairn" of all the eleven summits of Lochnagar. It is of nature's building, and resembles nothing more than the ruins of a gigantic Druid temple—huge blocks of granite (mostly elongated square masses) are huddled together or tilted atop of each other on the summit of this peculiar "Pap". At one part of the "cairn" a large square aperture (about 8 feet high by 4 feet wide) has been formed by the tilting and poising of a group of these enormous stones. We were requested to scramble up and have a peep through this great rude open portal. The effect is marvellous. Ascending as we did



direct from the Prince's Cairn we had not seen the loch from which the White Mounth takes its popular name; and, standing at this side, Lochnagar is still concealed by the large stones which form the "cairn". Through the open portal referred to the loch and the overhanging precipices suddenly appear before the onlooker, as if seen through a vast stereoscope. We shall never forget the weird picture. It was like a bit from Doré's illustrations of Dante's "Inferno". The snowfield over the Black Spout Corrie, the beetling grey precipices, with their dizzy summits in lurid outline against the sky, and the inky loch beneath, combined to leave a weird and lasting impression upon the mind of the beholder. Had this been the only sight of the outing it alone were good value for eight or ten hours of mountain climbing; but other sights of similar grandeur were yet before us.

The view from the Meikle Pap—west, north, and east—was magnificent. The Cairngorm mountains were specially clear. Large quantities of snow patched all the principal summits—Cairn Toul, Ben Muich Dhui, Cairngorm, Beinn a' Bhuid, and Ben Avon—the title peak showing an apparently unbroken snowfield. The Glengairn mountains were experiencing an electric storm, their tops enveloped in dense clouds that were, to all appearances, pouring down rain in torrents. Further eastward the Buck of Cabrach, Tap o' Noth, and Bennachie were clearly outlined; while the sun was shining bonnily on the kirk of Tarland in the middle distance. From Crathie to Craigendarroch the valley of the Dee was beautifully defined, as were every path and burn in the brown deer forest which formed the expansive foreground of the picture. The shower had not lasted ten minutes, and again the sun shone brightly upon us as we surveyed the West Highlands of Aberdeenshire from our lofty perch. In the clear light of the early afternoon it seemed but a stone's throw from the Pap into the ferny depths of Clashrathan, or on to the sturdy shoulder of Conacheraig.

The Meikle Pap, however, is an isolated peak, and this being so, like Napoleon's "ten thousand men", we had



marched up a hill and must straightway march down again. We had scorned the beaten track hitherto, and still nothing conventional could attract us. When we turned our faces toward the long ridge of Cuidhe Crom and the precipices, and Cac Carn Beag, that—high though we were—still overshadowed us—we resolved to cross the Lochnagar hollow and ascend to the main summit over the shoulder of the “Black Spout.” A party under the guidance of Morgan, the Ballater ghillie, were toiling, labouring up “the Ladder” when we began our descent into the “Inferno” which lies at the foot of the great corries. The task we had before us dwarfed such commonplace mountaineering as that in which the party mentioned were engaged, and put our limbs and our lungs through a pretty considerable ordeal. The basin of Lochnagar and its mountainous surroundings form as complete a wilderness of shattered rocks as any that may be named among the fastnesses of the Deeside Highlands, and those who would traverse it in safety must needs mind their p’s and q’s, or at any rate they should keep a sharp look out for foothold.

We had almost descended to the margin of the loch when our attention was arrested by what, to most of us, sounded like thunder-claps. But the Highlander of the party looked up into the Red Corrie and declared that “that was not right”! All eyes were at once bent in this direction, and all necks were craned to scan the top of the precipice. It was as the Highlander had diagnosed. There, on the skyline overhead, were three men moving. They seemed no bigger than fox-terriers, and certainly, as our Highland friend thought, they were behaving like puppies—throwing stones over the precipice to hear the reverberating noise thus produced. That noise, our friend explained, would be heard by deer several miles away; and it sounded very like musketry firing on a large scale.

The view from Cac Carn Beag was gratifying in the highest degree, considering that the clouds were driving overhead; while at no fewer than half a dozen distant points at once we could see that showers were falling, though none fell on us. Perhaps the furthest outlined eminence recog-



nised was the Lomonds of Fife, whose long ridge and two dome-like, or rather tower-like, heights were distinctly seen in the south-east. Standing in the "corridor" of this grand natural mountain cairn, looking over the breastwork stones, the balmy mildness of the atmosphere was generally remarked. Here, at an altitude of 3786 feet, the air—even in the breeze—was as soft as the "was'lan' winds" of Burns's native Kyle.

We eat our lunch at the "Poachers' Well"—two minutes' walk from the cairn; and hardly had we got the solids "washed down" our throats when a notable change came over the weather. Quite suddenly the mild atmosphere was replaced by a wind so cold that the hardiest member of our little company had to indulge in something like violent exercise in order to keep up the circulation of his blood. It was gloomy as we made our way to the top of the "Black Spout", and when we stepped down into the snow-bed which drips into the corrie, sleet began to fall. This was rapidly followed by a rattling shower of hail, which lasted only five minutes, after which the cloud passed off the mountain. It was well we did not indulge in the pastime of pushing stones down the "Spout", for when we went to the western edge to view the opposite precipices, we perceived Morgan and his party scrambling down the throat of the corrie to Lochnagar side—apparently engaged gathering ferns or searching for cairngorms. As we learned afterwards, Morgan had had a narrow escape of his life in the course of that passage—one of his party who had lingered above him in the corrie having unwittingly dislodged a stone, which grazed Morgan's head in one of its subsequent rebounds!

While still standing on the western brink of the "Black Spout", facing about north-east by east, and gazing into the rugged profundity of "Dark Lochnagar", we had the good fortune to witness a rainbow of phenomenal brightness, form, and proportions. It began (so far as we could see from our position) on the west side of Lochnagar. At anyrate, we saw its massive and brilliant colours between us and the margin of the loch, immediately at the bottom of the



“Spout”. It passed round the inner extremity of the loch by the foot of the precipices, up the stony hillside beyond, passing exactly over the apex of the Meikle Pap. Intersecting the greater Conacheraig, it crossed the belt of sunshine to northward, in which a moment before we had made out the kirk of Tarland, and rounded westward by the mountains of Glengairn, re-entering the Dee valley near Crathie, and coming back across the forest by the Gelder Shiel to the inner side of the lesser Conacheraig, within a short distance of the foot of the mountain on which we stood. The phenomenon was not therefore a bow, or arc, but almost a complete circle. The breadth of the belt of colours, which were of extraordinary brilliancy, appeared to be about twenty feet. About fifty feet above it a second rainbow appeared, but it was faint of colour, and only developed to the proportions of “a tooth”, reaching from the precipices to the east shoulder of the Meikle Pap. The “bow” took six minutes to develop and disappear; its greatest brilliancy lasted for one minute, and the vanishing time was 3.20.

We walked back along the corrie tops towards Cuidhe Crom, and had a splendid view to northward from the head of the “Red Spout”, Ben Rinnes being then added to the other familiar “pows” in sight. As we have indicated, it was a day of sudden atmospheric changes; and, while standing over the “Red Spout”, there came up such a blast of cold, north wind from the depths below us that we were ruthlessly hurstled back upon the hill-top, the wind developing great strength in its passage up the funnel-like “Spout”. This was all the more peculiar, that only half an hour before we had taken shelter in the snow cup of the “Black Spout” from an equally chilly south wind.

We descended by “the Ladder” in fine weather, and shall not soon forget “the glorious *fourth* of June”, nor, indeed, any of the varied experiences of our two days in Glen Muick.