

TWO DAYS AND A NIGHT IN ROTHLEMURCHUS AND THE CAIRNGORMS.

ABOUT twenty years ago we first crossed the great divide between Strath Dee and Strath Spey by the Learg Ghruamach. It happened in this way. While spending a holiday at Braemar we had occasion to go to Inverness in the month of July. The barometer was high and steady, and the weather clear, bright, and exceptionally warm. It occurred to us that "the Larig" offered a more direct and shorter route to the Highland capital than the circumbendibus by coach and rail to Aberdeen and from thence *via* Mulben to Inverness. Accordingly, we sent our portmanteau by the circuitous route, and arranged to tramp to Aviemore and join the Highland train there.

Driving to Derry Lodge on a fine bright day we turned our back on civilization, and proceeded by Glen Luibeg to prospect the—at that time to us—new country, and to extend our topographical knowledge by traversing this famous defile through the Cairngorms. The scenery has been so often and so well described that we can say nothing novel about it. Of course, we were impressed by the mountain barrier interposed by lofty Beinn Bhrotain, and the snow upon its broad bosom; the solitude and beauty of Glen Geusachan—its treeless, green-expanse watered and softened by its meandering stream, contrasted with the stern ruggedness in which this picture of pastoral quiet and beauty is framed. Then the stupendous conical mass of glistening granite protruded from Cairn Toul, named "Bodindevill", or "Bod-an-diaouil", by the ancient bare-footed "wylde, scurrilous people", described by Sir James Balfour, "amongst wych", he says, "ther is bot small feare and knowledge of God", arrested attention and wonderment. At all events, the "wylde, scurrilous people" seemed to have been also impressed with the tremendous features of

the Devil's Point, and named it accordingly. Then, on our right hand—fit *vis-a-vis* to Bod-an-diaouil—the jagged, impending precipices of Carn a' Mhaim towered above us as we skirted their base while threading the somewhat roughly macadamised footpath leading to the Larig by Glen Dee. The Dee, in many a curve, ran sparkling and softly murmuring on our left, and the air was musical by the ceaseless hum of invisible insect life, diversified occasionally by the bugle solo of some vagrant forest bee, or the sweeping chirp of the grasshopper. The air quivered in steaming vibration, and a thousand rills tinkled down the mountain sides. By-and-bye Glen Garbh-coire opened to the left displaying its magnificent corries, walled by the precipices of Cairn Toul and Braeriach. On a bright, hot day these natural features are delightful and exhilarating. In stifling mist or rainy downpour, your murmuring river and tinkling rills become unbearable nuisances. The sun, the great magician, whose touch turns every object to gold, changes the picture at his will. No wonder he was worshipped.

In due time we reached the stony, glacial mounds which environ the popular Wells of Dee, and lunched there. Resolved to return by this route, we formed a *cache* under a large stone, where a vigorous growth of *Polypodium Alpestre* around it effectually concealed a big *vasculum* containing provisions for refreshment on our way back. Resuming our journey through the wind-swept desolation of the Pass—in which cool winds blow be the day ever so warm—we soon reached the watershed and began the descent in the direction of the Spey. Here grim granitic desolation and waste are strewn in all directions. Here is the Learg Ghruamach, the gloomy, the frowning, the sullen, the forbidding. Even the running stream from time to time hides itself, disappears under ground, and deserts you as you descend, and stern sterility reigns around. In winter no road this way—the drift swirls piling wreaths and shrouds for the hapless wayfarer. What is the Witches' blasted heath compared with the riven sides of the Larig Ghru? But, as we proceeded, suddenly a far-off glimpse of

the green valley of the Spey in sunny radiance broke through the gloom, and the birch-clad Craigellachie and the column-crowned brow of Kinrara, diverted the attention from the black jagged precipices of Creag na Leacainn. Down the sides of the ice and stream-ploughed ravine, and on the slopes on either side, the advanced stragglers of the forest also began to appear, and soon volumed and vast Rothiemurchus forest spread out its battalions of dark pine on the low ground. Beyond shone out cultivated fields and pasture land breaking in upon the dark green of the wide pine forest, and the Spey, with many a wind and turn, glistened in the sunshine. In daylight, the footpath down the pass cannot be mistaken or left without energy and exertion, as the sloping mountain sides on either hand attain considerable height, and there is no inducement to diverge. There was, however, no Scottish Rights of Way direction post to guide us when we reached the termination of the footpath on a forest road, and, in place of turning to the left, we took to the right and went wrong. After some time, we reached the bank of the river Luineag in the neighbourhood, as we afterwards learned, of the Rothiemurchus mineral well. Neither ford nor bridge, however, could we see, and as the afternoon was wearing on, anxious thoughts began to arise whether we should be in time for the Inverness train at Aviemore. At this juncture, two men were observed at some distance from the opposite bank of the stream walking westwards, suggesting that they were upon a public road. So resolved, at all hazards, to ascertain our bearings, we stood not upon the ceremony of disrobing, but went right through the river Sandy Mac Ara fashion. The heat of the day justified this procedure, but on reaching the opposite bank we were disgusted by the view of a foot-bridge a short distance up the river where we could have crossed dry-shod. By the time we reached Aviemore our nether garments were presentably dry, but not so dry as the wearer of them. On a broiling hot day, on a long walk by a mountain pass, liquidation is craved through the waste occasioned by perspiration and evaporation, and no reasonable temperance man would

object to or forbid bacterial antidote among mountain water. Nature, however, craves for variety, and we found it possible to tire of grog. Accordingly, we had resolved, on reaching the hotel at Aviemore, to solace ourselves, and slock our importunate thirst with a pint or two—we thought we could manage two—of thirst-assuaging porter. But when we reached the neighbourhood of the railway station no trace of any house of entertainment for man or beast was to be found. The inn had improperly been sold and applied to a different purpose than that for which it was built, and the license-restricting justices of the district had, by their tyrannical policy, effectually prevented the thirsty stranger from having a glass of beer. They say cold tea is an admirable specific for thirst, but who sells cold tea? Local option! Yes, here was an object lesson on its wisdom. The “merchant” could only supply treacle and ginger beer, and a malign providence induced us to choose the latter. We were not long in discovering our mistake, and resorted to the water tap at the station to cool our coppers—where, just in the nick of time, the Highland train came up, found us, and carried us off, otherwise we must have drunk till we died of hydro-stomachus.

In due time, or, as customary, a short time after it, we reached the capital of the Highlands. It was the week of the wool fair. That ancient and curious annual gathering—where neither hoof of sheep nor fleece of wool appears—was supposed to endure for three or four days and a night, but by the hurry and pressure of modern business ways and methods, as well as the influence of the railway, it is being curtailed in time, and shorn of its former Celtic glory. The Gaelic Society had its annual meeting on the Thursday evening of the fair, when Gaelic speeches were made, Gaelic songs were sung by pretty Highland maidens, and Highland reels and sword dances danced to the delight of the partakers therein and the wonder and edification of the stranger. The late Professor Blackie was seldom absent, and although, when sometimes “chief”, he inappropriately spoke in English, his contributions to the fun were always welcomed and enjoyed. But Inverness during the week of

the wool fair is no place for the tourist or the stranger, unless on business. The town annually assumes the condition of a beleaguered city, and eatables, drinkables, and house accommodation become subject to ransom charges. Rarely is there much business done until the afternoon of Friday, after the "ordinaries". Every house of entertainment has its "ordinary" on that day. Prior to that time, seller and buyer have been assiduously trying to feel each other's pulses. On Friday, however, as we have said, when the shades of evening begin to fall, the capacious rooms of the Caledonian get crowded, and in an atmosphere thick with rolling clouds of tobacco smoke, and the odours of whisky, the ice thaws, and bargain-making goes on in a loud babel of tongues, calls for waiters, and hand-claps and shouts of concluded bargains. This goes on all through the night, for Forbes Mackenzie is dethroned and rules not here, and the business is not concluded and tranquillity restored until long after the sun has announced by his presence that it is to-morrow morning. One who has seen the big room of the Caledonian on the Friday night of the wool fair in July, can understand and credit the tradition of the "sleepy market" held during the night in former times in the month of June at Christ's Kirk of Kennethmont.

We left Inverness on our return journey by the late train of Friday evening, and reached Aviemore after midnight. The night was warm and calm. A full moon in a lovely sky smiled serenely on Cairngorm without being disturbed by that mountain, for it lay swathed in a gauzy coverlet of mist, causing no inconvenience to Luna, notwithstanding the poetic assertion of the author of the "Queen's Wake", and an exaggerated historical account that "the famous hill called "Kairne Gorum" is four miles high". The Ettrick Shepherd must surely have read and believed that account when he penned the lines—

"Mid wastes that dern and dreary lie,
 One mountain rears his mighty form ;
 Disturbs the moon in passing by,
 And smiles above the thunder storm".

We got a pressing invitation to spend the night under the

roof of a friend at Invereshie, but the beauty of the night tempted us to tramp the Larig by moonlight, and alone. We reckoned that daylight was only a few hours off, and we had not at that time heard about the demons that frequent Rothiemurchus forest, such as the "Bodach-an-Dun", the red-handed "Ly Erg", and "Maag Moulach" with her hairy left hand. Had we known of those nocturnal visitants, we would have gone to Invereshie. We thanked and bade adieu to our friend at Aviemore, and, crossing the river, made what we intended as a bee line for the Pass. The solitude would have surfeited Zimmerman and a good many of his relations. Not a sound broke the solemn silence of the forest. It was the hour "when churchyards yawn and graves give up their dead". In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, the thud of hoofs upon the soft ground made us, like Lizzie of Halloween celebrity, jump laverock height, but, happily, the disturbance was caused neither by the deil, nor Rothiemurchus demon, but probably by a small herd of deer startled by our unexpected appearance. At length we reached a forest road which afforded good footing, but keeping upon it too far to the east, we missed the footpath for the Pass, and thereby largely augmented our toil. Conscious of our blunder, we took what we intended to be a line sure to bring us to the Pass and the footpath; but moonlight is deceptive, and a conspicuous guiding post not being then planted as now, we could not hit it. However, the footing was exceptionally dry, and we kept moving uphill in what we considered to be the direction of the Larig, accompanied by a troop of flies who ought to have been sleeping, in place of titilating and annoying us with their untimeous attentions. The quacking of ducks on our left indicated the location of some small tarn or forest pool, and that the birds were in comfortable circumstances. By-and-bye we surmounted the grassy ridge of a shallow, circular hollow, across which ran a path or deer track, when right in front, not three yards off, our way was suddenly barred by what, in the dim light, seemed to be a wolfish form or an apparition, big, gaunt, tawny. A cold rill suddenly

trickled down our back at this unexpected encounter, and you could have knocked us down with a feather. Courage is a mechanical virtue, and requires assiduous practice, cultivation, and support—

“ Wi’ tippenny we fear nae evil,
Wi’ usquabagh we’d face the deevil”.

Being somewhat out of training at the time, we could have turned and fled. Did not the Great Frederick perform an unexpected reverse movement from his first battle—Mollwitz—and, in fact, bolt from the battlefield, and had he not to be ridden after for many miles to be told that his army had won the battle, and to bring him back? If we had followed the example of this great captain we could have pleaded precedent. Remember, this was our first encounter with the form of a wolf, bodied or disembodied, except in a menagerie, only we reflected that, before we could have run six yards, the animal might have had a mouthful of our breeches. So we stood our ground armed with an umbrella, and the creature, timeously realizing that he had a desperate character to deal with, like a sensible beast, chose the better part of valour, and deliberately diverged to the right over the ridge and disappeared. Subsequent reflection inclined us to the belief that it was a big fox and not a wolf, escaped from some travelling menagerie, that we encountered. The astonishment at our meeting was evidently mutual, and, “ who’d have thought of seeing you”, no doubt was the language that each would have used, had we been able to give it utterance. Probably Reynard was on his way to the pool where the ducks were quacking.

Soon after this incident, we emerged from the forest, and, as day was dawning, we reached the small tarn on the Castle Hill, called Lochan Dubh a’ Chadha. Being somewhat pumped out by the sultriness of the night and our long walk, we sat down here to refresh, but found the water soft, warm, and vapid. The cloud lay white on Cairngorm, but in the north-east the sky was foretelling the rising of the sun. For thousands and tens of thousands of years new days have been created, and we think nothing of their

repetition. Here, on a lonely mountain side, you are compelled to feel what an insignificant atom you are in the universe, and what, even to you, a hitch in the daily arrangement would mean. Starting again, we held onwards and upwards, and neared the cloud which lay draping closely the bosom of the mountain. We expected that we were in the neighbourhood of Creag na Leacainn, and soon found that we were in the bottom of a large corrie, out of which rushed three hinds, disturbed by our presence. They ran past us down hill. That indicated no road in front; and so it was, for, so far as we could see, we were surrounded by perpendicular crags, enclosing dazzling snow wreaths in their black rifts, and having a little loch in the west corner of the corrie. It became obvious that we could not reach the Larig that way. We were in the Coire an Lochain, and knew it not. Puzzled and looking upwards, while considering what course we should next take, there slowly appeared a revelation out of the hitherto impenetrable mist cloud above us. Far aloft, there began to protrude a vast mass of rock, black, savagely jagged, impending destruction. The spectacle was appalling. The rock appeared suspended in the air. It formed the apex of the encircling precipice, the wall of which was shrouded below by the slowly-moving impenetrable vapour. The precipices encircling the corries on the north front of Cairngorm, when displayed in the sunlight, form a majestic spectacle, but do not suggest the terrific. When shrouded by vapour you see but part, leaving the mind to suggest what is mysteriously hid. Soon the influence of the sun rolled up the curtaining cloud and revealed Cairngorm in its morning glory, and by the Fiacail a' Choire Chais we made for the summit of the mountain. Here we lighted on an adventurous frog, suggesting that human bipeds have not a monopoly of enterprise. Also, although Hogg poetically affirmed that the bugle of the forest bee was never sounded here, we found on the green carpets of moss campion, blazing in purple blossom, myriads of a small, thick-bodied, Arctic moth, tumbling and fluttering around in evident enjoyment of their brief period of existence. Arrived at

the summit about 8 a.m., we sought the Marquis's Well, prepared tea, and breakfasted under the shade of our umbrella, expanded to keep off the intense heat and persistent flies, which crowded its dome, revelling in an Alnaschar feast of essence of *alpaca*. Hope they enjoyed it! After breakfast and a rest, we leisurely strolled towards Ben Muich Dhui. That July Saturday was a day to be remembered for its intense heat. Several deaths from sun-stroke occurred in Scotland on that day. We descended from Ben Muich Dhui by Coire Mor, and recovered our *vasculum* intact. The water in the Pools of Dee tempted us by its cool, clear, refreshing invitation. It was just the depth for a comfortable swim. There were no Sanitary Inspectors about with their fads and fancies. Freedom ever abides among the Cairngorms; so we disrobed and enjoyed a delightful plunge. The flies accompanied us, but would not wet their feet. We put their persistency to the test by diving and keeping under water as long as possible, but, although they would not dive, they waited for our returning poll, and so soon as it emerged they were ready to shampoo it again. We have said that Freedom abides in Glen Dee, and so it does in Glen Derry. Man among the hills inclines to revert to his primeval condition, and, weather permitting, to dispense with shoddy. As an example, a friend coming down Glen Derry unexpectedly encountered, on a warm afternoon, a youthful party, *en route* for the Shelter Stone, walking divested of trousers, their attire consisting of shoes and stockings, shirt, Albanian fashion, fluttering in the breeze, waistcoat, and cap; a cool, sensible, and picturesque, though unusual, rig-out for a Highland glen on a hot day. Situation and circumstances admit of material difference in such as well as other matters, but we would not advise anyone to call upon his banker in such light attire when about to negotiate a cash credit. Even a Highland regiment seen for the first time causes a sensation, especially among ladies.

In due time, we traversed Glen Dee, turned into Glen Luibeg, and found a conveyance waiting for us at the Derry; and that night we slept without rocking. We have never

had other than pleasant memories of this outing. We would, with pleasure, do it again, were the years we have lived since then rolled back, and the vigour of former times restored. To the younger members of the Club we say, go and do likewise. They will, besides other advantages from such an outing, in the poetic language of *Punch*,

“Drink the heather’s fragrance round their feet,
In draughts wherewith wild Nature strengthens Man”!

D. O.



THE CAIRN, CAIRN TOUL.