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A WEEK-END IN GLEN GAIRN.

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IN these days of rapid cycling the pedestrian mountaineer must be content to be classified, with the traditional "Buchan train", amongst those sixth-day works of Creation described as "creeping things". Pedestrianism, however, has charms which easily place it above cycling, alike as means of exercise and of recreation—mental and physical. For, while the cyclist overworks certain of his muscles, and is almost constantly on the outlook for "good road", the pedestrian exercises every sinew and organ of his body; and, if he has an eye to the study of nature, he has ample time and opportunity to con her ever-open book. "But", replies the cyclist, "who that has at most only a week-end of leisure has the patience to foot each mile of road wearily in twenty minutes, when in five he can cover the distance on wheels"? This argument must be met as Dickens' Mr. Dick met the criticism that his favourite room was "not big enough to swing a cat in". Mr. Dick ingeniously assured his critic that he "really did not want to swing a cat". In the same sense the mountaineer does not want to break any time record, his object being to keep in the open, inhale mountain air, and enjoy mountain scenery and solitudes.

To the city man of average *physique* there is, in our opinion, no better means of recuperation than moderate mountaineering—the Highland glen, with its scents, sounds, and sights; the pleasant odours of birches, pines, and heather, the songs of birds, the hum of insects, the chattering of burns, the rush of the linn—what could be more recreative? What more bracing than the mountain breeze, or more invigorating to nerve and limb and lung than the ascent of the rugged corrie? What more likely to compel a man to “examine himself” than the solitudes of the moorland and the mountain?

At anyrate, it was to obtain recreation and exercise that we resolved to spend a July week-end in Glen Gairn—with Ben Avon’s summit as the apex of our expedition. Apart from a few pounds of the necessaries of life, we made no special provision for the journey; and this was how it fell out:—Left Aberdeen at 12.20 on Saturday afternoon, reaching Ballater at 2.30, and, after finally adapting our satchels, walked out of Ballater as the steeple clock was striking 3. At 3.30 we stood face to face with the well-known “Poller Legend”, at the Deeside end of the upper Glen Gairn road, namely:—

Gairn Shiel	. . . . .	5 miles.
Corndavon	. . . . .	10½ „
Loch Builg	. . . . .	13¼ „

Behold, then, the finger-post of the path, which, with sundry halts of from 20 to 60 minutes’ duration here and there by the way, we worked out in time thus:—

Gairn Shiel	. . . . .	5 p.m.
Corndavon	. . . . .	7.50 „
Loch Builg	. . . . .	9.30 „

As the reader may observe, we took ample time on the journey. Yes, we looked well around us. Early in our walk we noted the first harvest-home gatherings of the field-fare, where the hay had been lately reaped, while, among the rich woodlands that skirt the roadside in the lower glen, we watched the ongoings of Robin, Wren, Titling, and Co.



We counted no fewer than twenty different species of song birds in the first five miles. There were all the elements that go to make up the happy hunting-grounds of the small feathered tribes—rocky hillsides, banks of sand, waste lands, tilled fields, pastures with flocks, wild underwood, thorn roses, furze, broom, bracken, foxglove, bog-myrtle, meadow-queen, goose-foot, sedgy grasses in moss and mire-land, cairns of stones, dry and turf dykes, springs of clear water, lichened walls and mossy banks, brooklets with rushes and forget-me-nots, minnowy burns, overgrown with arn-scrub and hazel, woodlands with ferns, heather, blaeberreries, “aitnachs”, rasps, and brambles.

Here, as elsewhere, we noted the increase of the starling, and the decrease of the sedge-warbler, the siskin, and the skylark. We fear the former is the cause and the latter the effect. We can remember when the starling, like the plover, swallow, and wag-tail, were visitors only; but, during the past quarter of a century, Mr. Starling has plainly indicated that he has “come to stay”. Now, we hold that the incursion of this aggressive feathered nomad is on a par with the invasion of Spain by the Moors, or that of Ancient Italy by the Goths and Vandals—not to speak of the conquests of Cæsar and William of Normandy. We regard the starling as a murdering Moor and a destructive Vandal, and hate him accordingly. Not only has he turned the once-familiar jackdaw from house and home in the chimney-top, and himself become a pest there, but, being an egg-eater, he threatens with extermination some of the most lovable feathered creatures of our countryside. Indeed, none but birds that possess the instinct to conceal their nests, either by imitation of the nests’ surroundings or by the choice of secret places, can survive his depre-dations.

We renewed acquaintance with many of our “summer visitors”, including a red-poll (from the sunny south); swallows—three species (from Timbuctoo); wag-tails—two species (from Algiers and Morocco); a graceful cross-bill (from “Norro-way o’er the faem”); golden and tufted plovers and the common peewee (from “the Continong”);

and the cuckoo (from goodness knows where). The restless ouzel, hunting on his stepping-stones in the river bed, entertained us where the road came near the bank; and an oyster-catcher, in all the glory of his pied plumage, and a spotted woodpecker, refulgent in his blood-red hackle, each disported proudly near our path in honour of our visit; while the curlew, the heron, and the dotterel each put in an appearance, to show us the latest steps of a Highland Fling consistent with the dignity of their long-drawn-out proportions. But the most friendly of all was a family of red grouse. Our path for the moment lay through the heather, and we were walking briskly forward when, a couple of yards on our left front, a moor-cock rose with an impatient "Tut, tut, tut"! He took French leave to a considerable distance, while we might have stepped upon his devoted mate and interesting family of nine, who croodled in the heather, within reach of our right hand. The gorbings swarmed about the mother-bird—several under her wings and tail, two on her back, while three were content with the imaginative protection afforded by burying their heads among her feathers. With steady, questioning eye the hen-grouse gazed at us for a second or two, then reluctantly cleared her wings of her beloved, tyrannical young ones, and manœuvred to direct our attention from the wingless cheepers to her own devoted head. She cringed up close to our boots, then, looking at us over her shoulder, crept slowly along the path. We smiled, but refused to follow; the young birds made off to cover in all directions, but we had only to stoop to pick one up—a sturdy little fellow, with bright, fearless eye. The mother-bird became frantic. She literally groaned in agony of mind, and, unable longer to look upon the sight, took wing. At once our sympathies were with her, we laid down our captive near the nest, and hardly had we quitted the spot, when Mother Grouse—whose flight was really only another pretence—completed her circuit of a little knoll and returned ere we had quite moved off, calling excitedly upon her scattered darlings.

Glen Gairn is not now a populous place. We met only

six persons in the whole length of the glen, and we saw not a score during the two long summer days that we spent therein. Indeed, Glen Gairn tells again the now old story of the depopulation of the Highlands. Thirty odd farms and crofts in the upper clearings—whereon generations of healthy lads and comely lasses were reared in years gone by—have long since been thrown back into a state of wild nature, to raise grouse and red deer for the entertainment of the sportsman. Though not strikingly picturesque, yet it is a bonnie glen, and presents many points of interest to the pedestrian. It is fairly well wooded—birches and pines mostly prevailing. As far up as Gairnshiel and Wade's Bridge there are a few quiet homesteads and well-tilled farms; thence to Corndavon are sheep pastures. Beyond is moorland, and mountain deer forest. The whole glen is resplendent with a profusion of wild flowers. We gathered the grass of Parnassus on the bank by the roadside, and we saw rare ferns and other plants that would have gladdened the heart of the botanist. Though the miles are long in Glen Gairn—as where are they not when measured by the Gael?—we had not a weary or uninterested hour while we were traversing it. About three miles up the glen, in the *glac* through which the Tarland Road passes, the pedestrian gets a fine view of Morven and Culblean; and, if the reader desires topographical and geological variety, he will find it easily in Glen Gairn. There are bits of folk-lore too. Rineatan, about nine miles from Ballater, once belonged to a scion of the clan Macdonald, a branch now represented by the Macdonalds of St. Martin's, Perthshire. Captain Macdonald, who had served in the army during the Napoleonic wars, sold the estate to the Farquharsons of Invercauld some half a century ago. He parted with it, doubtless, with a good Scottish grudge—if we may judge by the postscript of the bargain, in which he reserved to himself and his successors the grim right of sepulture in the tomb of the Macdonalds of Rineatan. It would not appear, however, that much use has been made of this mortuary reservation, for the spot in question looks quite neglected. It is hidden from the eye of the casual traveller in a remote corner of a

wood some little distance behind the old mansion house, but it is still known to residents in the glen as "Macdonald's Aisle". The pedestrian who is not specially interested had better not follow the high road where it loops round upon the old mansion house of the Macdonalds, else he will certainly miss the footpath through the meadow, which shortens the road by a mile.

Nor was Glen Gairn without its surprises to us on that first day of our expedition. At Rinloan, about half-way up the strath, there was wont to be an hostelry, for the "entertainment of man and beast". Since the glen became depopulated this public-house had ceased to be remunerative, and it hardly needed the influence of "the shooting tenant" (who dreads the possibility of poachers being harboured unawares near his preserves) to put an end to the licence. At anyrate, there has not been an inn at Rinloan for a number of years, though the house once known as "the public" still stands there. It is occupied by Mr. Duncan Davidson, one of the best-known old inhabitants of Glen Gairn. He is a merchant and a farmer, but he serves the community in other useful capacities besides. We had calculated upon getting a loaf of bread at Mr. Davidson's shop, but our hopes fell when we found a locked door. It appears that a merchant in these remote places does not stand behind the counter to await his customers. He fears not their going elsewhere. We were giving a final knock on the shop door and looking hopelessly around, when our eye fell upon a neat white bell-tent standing on a trim green near a group of houses on the opposite side of the road; and, our eye wandering back again to the shop buildings, fell upon the legend "Studio" painted on one of the doors. "Hallo"! thought we, "this is no ordinary ferm-toon"; and we proceeded to make investigations. We soon found Mr. and Mrs. Davidson "at home". First we were regaled with milk and scones; and, our wants expanding, we afterwards enjoyed a hearty tea. In the course of table-talk they informed us that the "Studio" without was the property and sanctum of their son, Mr. Duncan Davidson, junior, and that the tent upon the lawn was one of his "freaks". The

artist was absent in pursuit of landscape subjects, but we were ushered into the studio by Mr. Davidson, the elder. It is a square room, all the size of the wooden building, well-lighted and comfortable, with every appearance of earnest, tasteful work. Under the orthodox northern light stood the artist's easel, bearing a large canvas in oils* of a study on Loch Avon side, partly finished. Standing on the floor or hanging on the walls were specimens of original landscapes, genre work, and copies. There was ample evidence, too, that Mr. Davidson had studied portraiture. What surprised us most, however, was a couple of life-sized figure studies of male and female models vigorously drawn in colours. These pictures occupied prominent places on two separate walls. No sooner did we catch sight of them than our lips involuntarily uttered the word "Paris" ! "Had the artist studied in Paris, then" ? "Aye, he was there a while". From any of the well-used easy chairs one could reach handily to a tobacco pipe ; and, on a small table in a corner, lay a fiddle and bow, the case for which had been thrown on the floor. Huddled, as it were, in a corner we found a rude but effective lay figure, composed of rough bits of wood, the arms and legs being deftly linked to the trunk with iron wire. Altogether the room had a distinctly hybrid aspect of the Latin Quarter and Bohemia. On the following evening, when we had returned from the mountain, we again called at this oasis in the desert, and smoked a pipe with the young artist himself. He has good looks, is an interesting conversationalist, and not ashamed to tell you that he can hold the plough as well as he can paint in oils and water-colours. Mr. Davidson is to a large extent self-taught, yet his work in the field of art is meritorious, and the aggregate annual sales of his pictures in this remote place produce a handsome sum.

We were near the Kirk of Glen Gairn when we got our first glimpse of Ben Avon. The sun was high above him,

* This picture has since become the property of Mr. Thomas Jamieson, F.I.C.—the scene being of special interest in connection with his recent proposal to tap the Avon, near Inchroary, for the benefit of Aberdonians, instead of patching up the Deeside aqueduct.

and lighted up his rugged rock-crests and green corries with brilliant effect. His massive, majestic proportions dominated the whole landscape, and impressed us with his superiority over the hills—Culardoch and others—which just then formed the sides of the glen. But this illuminated view of his grandeur did not lay hold of our minds as did that we enjoyed several hours afterwards, when, in the gloaming, we opened up the Loch Builg valley on our right front, and, under his own weird shadow, viewed Ben Avon's immense outline in sombre silhouette. The setting sun, in a glorious halo of molten gold and silver, was poised above the black rocks of Clach Bhan on the extreme right, and threw back a great search-light shaft among the hilltops. Perhaps it was the splendid glamour of that sunset that made us select Clach Bhan as the summit of our first ambition of the morrow. At all events, the scene became vividly pictured on our memory, and we thought upon its vanished glories as we brewed a modest night-cap of whisky-toddy, and betook ourselves to the best apology for a bed which we could find in the now gloomy wilderness of Glenavon forest. Once we were roused by the near approach of a herd of hinds. We had gone to rest near their favourite drinking fountain. When we got up to look at our disturbers, they vanished, like children of the mist, into the grim shadows of the glen, though we could trace their course for some distance by the crackling of the heather under their nimble feet. It is dreich work wooing Morpheus when one has neither bedroom nor bed. Yet, at last, weary with our long march, we were lulled into a deep snooze by the swish of the burn in the corrie, the lapping of Loch Builg's black waters, and the weird sough of the night wind.

“The sleep of the just” is the luxury of the poet, not of the mountaineer, who, when he has to improvise a bed, must be content to sleep by sections. Now it is an arm from the elbow downwards, again it is a leg from the hip, with occasional forty-wink snatches of the whole man. In our many waking intervals during that night we thought of the genial sunshine in which, a few hours previously, we

had ascended the glen, and the warmth of that bright memory helped us to shake off the shivers which in these wild places come with the "wee short hour ayont the twal". Anon, in the absence of moon and stars, we would glower into the black *Inferno* which a murky midnight makes of a Highland solitude, and bitterly think of things inhospitable and of Maud Muller's "might have been"! Baillie Nicol Jarvie was right. One need not expect to find the comforts of the Saut Market on the apron of Ben Avon. So, we were fain to pull our bonnet over our brow, and make the best of the situation. At length there appeared a faint indication that the sky was still overhead. Slowly a grey light began to diffuse the darkness. And we were beginning to distinguish the outlines of our surroundings, when suddenly there was a fluttering among the birches close by. A little scream of alarm followed; and then one of Nature's tragedies was enacted before our eyes. Two tiny birds darted out of cover, followed by a lusty hawk. The chase was swift and terrible. In eager flight the little warblers rose into the lift of the summer dawn, and their pursuer, keen as a rapier-thrust, darted upon his prey. He struck the nearer of the two, but, his hold failing, the little victim fell dead upon the moor below. On sped the ruthless hawk, without casting a look after the fallen one. In a twinkling he overtook its mate, and with it, like a spirit of evil, vanished from our view. Thus even now, through every species of living creature, the natural law of *might* is the practical law of *right*, just as it was in the days of "pit and gallows", and of Highland katerans.

It was getting on for five in the morning when a cold northerly breeze induced us to "rise and shake our feathers", preparatory to the ascent of Ben Avon. Of course, we were already "dressed". The loch looked sulky. There was no sun, the weather being decidedly dull. Midway up the corrie a pack of red hinds and their dappled calves were bleating in welcome to the day. Yet we were not cheerless as we busied ourselves making tea for breakfast. And that meal over, we had a refreshing "wash-up" in the clear cold water of a rill that came bustling off the

mountain side. Then, slinging our knapsacks on our backs, we began our second day's wandering in the wilderness in good form. Of course, we exploded again the theory that Loch Builg pours all his waters down through Banffshire into the Avon and the Spey. We think there can be no doubt that the low-lying lochlets at the Aberdeenshire end of Loch Builg are partially fed from that loch; and we noted that the bottom of the tarns nearest the head of the loch is literally alive with springs created by the pressure of water from Loch Builg, which stands above the level of these lochlets.

We have already forecast our route. The first part of our second day's programme was to ascend, *via* Meall na Gainimh, to Clach Bhan at the north-east end of the mountain. Therefore, our course lay along the old bridle road in Glen Builg. The first thing of interest offered us on our way, apart from the loch itself, was "The Soldiers' Cairn". The saga goes that two Jacobite fugitives from Culloden, on their way home to Glen Gairn, perished here of cold and exhaustion during a snowstorm, and when found were, soldier-like, buried where they had fallen. "Oh, wae's me for Prince Charlie"! what a hullabaloo that rebellion of his did cause on this tight little island! We confess to a fond love of the romance of the '45, and to a respect for the gallantry of most of the Highlanders devoted to the "bonnie" Prince. Still, we felt no disaffection towards the House of Guelph when, with a *requiescat in pace*, we placed a stone upon that lonely cairn on the bleak shore of Loch Builg.

Having passed the loch, and come within sight of Inch-roxy, we re-forded the Builg Burn, and, about nine o'clock, began our ascent of Meall na Gainimh. An hour and a half afterwards we came in sight of the black rocks of the Bhan. Clach Bhan is by no means the highest peak of Ben Avon, but it is perhaps the most interesting of the many rocky protuberances which distinguish the crest-line of that mountain. A keen, cold, north wind met us on the summit, but we buttoned our jackets, and briskly scaled the rocks. All the basins contained water—clear, but pith-



less to the palate. The number of these font-like perforations on Clach Bhan is legion. Not many years ago the Clach was the "Mecca" of the Gaelic wives of the surrounding glens, near and far. Tradition also associates the wife of Fingal with Clach Bhan. One of the many crevices in these rocks contains a wonderful chamber, half roofed over with a massive shelf of stone, and floored with an unbroken slab about fifteen feet square. The floor slants up into the open half of the chamber, and slopes gently down into a pool of crystal-clear water which fills the covered half. This curious apartment is known by the name of "Lady Fingal's Bath". Where the waters come from and whither they go cannot be determined at a glance; but there it is, an inviting bath of clear cold water. How Lady Fingal occupied herself among these mountains, and where she resided, the legend tells not; although we are told that the poor lady lost her life by drowning at the Linn of Avon—the foaming waters of which we can see yonder, like a white kerchief spread on the heather of the glen, 2000 feet below where we stand. Hallo! our thoughts on Lady Fingal are suddenly scattered by a furious shower of hail, borne down upon us upon the back of the north wind. No matter; the accommodation afforded by Clach Bhan is equal to our needs. Turning an angle of the rock, and hurrying along an open corridor, we find perfect shelter from the storm in a low-roofed chamber formed by an overhanging shelf of rock. The inner portion of the floor of this hospitable grotto is formed of a bed of granite pellets, clean and dry; and along the front, in the open, is a mat of rich mountain vegetation—heather, lichens, grasses, and tiny flowering plants. "The storm without may roar and rustle" since now we lie in perfect comfort, our feet inward on the pellet bed, which is obligingly adaptable, and our chest and elbows resting on the sweet-smelling carpet of greenery. Here we lay and smoked till the elements ceased to rage and the sun smiled again on the rugged summits of Ben Avon. It was still, however, so disagreeably cold in the wind on the mountain crest that we resolved to descend a few hundred feet on the lee side for shelter. It was de-

lightly calm and pleasant walking at an elevation of over 3000 feet. Except where we had occasionally to cross a corrie, the ground under foot was for the most part as soft and elastic as a Turkey carpet. After passing on our right the grey crags that overhang Lochan nan Gabhar, we stepped out on our long walk to the highest summit of the Ben. The panorama of mountain scenery that lay around us is poorly described as magnificent. Many of the summits visible were evidently in the turmoil of storm, while the action of the clouds for many miles within the radius of our vision was particularly interesting, and at times strikingly beautiful. After surveying in an occasional few minutes' halt the scenes behind, and all around us, our eyes delighted to come back again to Lochnagar, on our left front. During our walk along the ridge of Ben Avon we watched Lochnagar in all the varying moods of its "steep frowning glories", and now and then we could see beyond it eastwards as far as the Hill of Fare and Cairn-mon-earn, with all the bigger hills—Morven, Mount Keen, and the others—in the middle distance. We spent five hours on this grand mountain solitude, where the only living creatures to be met with are

"The wild flock, that never needs a fold"

—the red deer, the ptarmigan, and a blithe, though solitary, snow-bunting. At an elevation considerably over 3000 feet we saw a young ouzel. We were crossing a corrie filled with snow, which the mountain torrent had tunnelled, and at the upper end of the snow-bed the lonely birdie was hopping on the stones in the bed of the stream. On our appearing he vanished down the tunnel, and we were prepared to descend to the foot of the snow-bed to see him once again, but he studied our convenience, for he bobbed up from a "skylight" in the snow, and showed us his lovely breast of frosted silver ere he vanished into his white-walled dungeon.

"This is not solitude ; 'tis but to hold
Converse with Nature's charms, and view her stores untold".

Perhaps the most impressive mountain scenery of the

day was that we obtained when, approaching the Aberdeenshire boundary, we again ascended to the crest of the mountain, and faced those two great lines of Cairngorm "stalwarts". In the front rank is Stob an t-Sluichd, heavily corniced with snow, standing shoulder to shoulder with Beinn a' Bhuid, whose gloomy precipices overhang Dubh Lochan. The great gulf between us and them is bridged by that extraordinary backbone of Nature yecept "The Sneck". Behind them in more extended line rise Ben Bynac, Cairngorm, Beinn Mheadhoin, and Ben Muich Dhuì—the latter black in the centre of a storm. It was blowing "great guns" when, at one o'clock in the afternoon, we reached the highest top, and on all fours scaled the rocks to the cairn. To have stood upright would have been to risk being swept off like flies before the gale. In lee of the cairn, however, we sat serenely surveying the wonderful scene, at an elevation of nearly 4000 feet. Crawling like crabs on our backs, feet foremost, we descended from our precarious coign of 'vantage, with our faces towards the "Ben of Storms". At this moment we remarked that, had we chosen any other of the Cairngorms for our expedition that day, we certainly should have experienced bad weather, and very likely should have got little or no view. Could these storm-fiends have heard that exultation in our good luck? Subsequent events suggest an answer in the affirmative. For, hardly had we settled down, half an hour afterwards, to our well-earned luncheon at one of the wells of the Gairn, when, on looking back to the pinnacle of rock that we had just quitted, our eyes fell upon three of the scouts of the enemy of mountaineers. They were pillars of mist, tall as a steeple, and as active as Bashi-Bazouks. They were whirling and gesticulating as if enjoying our discomfiture. "Let us pack up quickly", we said, "and begone while yet we can see our way". We lost not a moment; yet in less time than that the enemy was upon us in force, the mist surging round us as if a steam boiler had burst under our noses, and the landscape everywhere was quite extinguished. While packing our satchels we held a brief council of war. How

should we proceed? We were about equal distance from Inver Inn and Rinloan. The decision was in favour of the latter. We were sure of our line of retreat, for we had stopped to lunch in the cup of the Allt an Eas Mhoir, and that burn is the ladder into Glen Gairn. With us, as with the Highlanders on campaign, it was "bundle and go", and we went with spirit. The mist had been quickly followed up by a pattering rain, which developed, in five minutes, into a heavy snowstorm; and before we had descended a thousand feet we were making snowballs off our chests and shoulders. The corrie was heavily charged with old snow in cornices overhead and in gullies below; but the path was clear, and within an hour and a half we were in the open glen.

There is little else to tell. We passed three herds of hinds in Glen Gairn ere we reached the driving road. We had seen four herds of hinds and two of stags on the mountain, for "the monarch of the glen" does not herd with his consorts in the nursing time. It is a long walk from the top of Ben Avon to Rinloan, but we accomplished it by steady, measured walking, and when we arrived, at 6.30 in the evening, the good folks gave us a hearty Highland welcome. We enjoyed a sumptuous evening meal, a cheery gloaming hour of crack, and we slept the sleep delicious which is the privilege of the healthy mountaineer. After breakfast next morning we walked eight miles into Ballater, in time for the 10.15 train, and were duly deposited on the platform at Aberdeen at five minutes past twelve.

The Club is indebted to Messrs. G. & W. Morgan, Aberdeen, for the use of the two blocks, "Ballater and Craigendarroch", and Loch Builg". These illustrations are from the handsome volume "Queen Victoria's Highland Home and Vicinity", recently published by them.