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BEN ALDER.

BY WILLIAM GARDEN.

IN Volume I. of this Journal, and there at page 213, Mr. John Clarke gives an interesting and well-detailed account of an expedition made by the Club to Ben Alder in July, 1894.

To recapitulate Mr. Clarke's article—the party “set sail” from the Dalwhinnie end of Loch Ericht, landed at Alder Bay, and thence made the ascent, descending by the Coire Gleadhreach Beag to the Bealach Dubh, and thence *via* Loch Pattack to Lochericht Lodge, where their “vessels” were waiting them for the return journey to Dalwhinnie.

I trust that the members of the Cairngorm Club generally, and particularly those who have read Mr. Clarke's article, will pardon me if I venture to give an account of another ascent of this interesting and rather inaccessible mountain. To those who demand an excuse for such a liberty may I plead that our “attack” was made from a different starting-point, was entirely an “overland” route, was made partly during the night, and during a very severe thunderstorm, which complicated matters considerably.

The subordinate in a large and busy legal firm in Edinburgh who would pursue the unrivalled pleasures of mountaineering to any great extent during the limited space of a week-end, without incurring a breach of office

hours and the consequent penalties, must be prepared to banish at once from his mind such luxuries as going to bed; and the silent hours of midnight must find him doggedly negotiating—it may be with uncertain step—some treacherous peat-bogs or mountain steep, if he would conquer the envied peak. Such were the arguments which Mr. Gibson and I had used, when, on Saturday, 24th July, 1897, we found ourselves in the Fort-William train which leaves the Waverley at 3.50 p.m.

The previous week had been hot and sultry, and as we rushed through Corstorphine and our view expanded, huge masses of copper-coloured clouds could be seen towering above the Pentland Hills, and looming over the flats of Lanarkshire—sure heralds of a coming storm. It was only when we were leaving Gortan station on the West Highland line, however, and when we began to cross the weary wastes of Rannoch Moor that the forked lightning commenced to play freely, and to convince us that the storm was already on us. Rannoch station was reached about 8.45 p.m., and with many silent misgivings (on the writer's part at any rate) we got out on the dreary platform, where already the large rain-drops were beginning to make their impression. A few passengers viewed us curiously from out the spacious saloons which are run on this line—well adapted for enjoying the unique scenery of the country regardless of the elements; and, as the train moved off and left us on the lonely moor, no doubt some would remark—"Who are these arrayed so strange?" "Why those ropes and hob-nailed boots?" and indeed, justifiably perhaps, "Are these men sane?" The train is gone; and here we stand on the deserted platform of Rannoch station (if a station it may be called), surrounded on all sides by the watery peat-hags of the great moor, and with nought to break the silence but the boom of distant thunder and the dying murmur of the train as it toils up to Corroun. With the parting train our last and only escape from the storm is gone. There were (then at any rate) no houses at the station to shelter us, and, to return to Edinburgh within the time at our disposal, we

must catch the 10 a.m. Sunday train from Inverness to Perth, timed to reach Dalwhinnie about 1 p.m. Keeping prominently in view, therefore, that we had only 16 hours to traverse an unknown country, we at once started off in an easterly direction along the Camasericht road, and this road we followed to its junction with the Corroul path. It was becoming very dark and the storm was now full on us. The rain fell in sheets, and the growing darkness was only relieved every now and again by an occasional flash of lightning. Under such conditions it was with no little hesitation that we prepared to pilot our course over the



BENALDER COTTAGE.

wastes lying between us and the south end of Loch Ericht. A hurried examination of the map showed us that our course lay by the south shore of Lochan Sron Smeur and the north side of Lochan Loin nan Dubhach. Feeling fairly confident we should be able to see those small sheets of water in the gloom, we bade good-bye to the road and plunged into the mysteries of the moor, keeping a northerly direction. Some may still remember the great storm of that night; I do not think *we* shall soon forget

it. As we ploughed along in the dark, every other minute the whole of the eastern horizon was illuminated with magnificent displays of sheet lightning lasting several seconds, and in the foreground long fingers, as it were, of forked lightning would seem to come tumbling down from the zenith towards the earth, and find a resting-place in the bogs and hillsides—a weird sight indeed, and not without its dangers in this exposed place. At last we reach the Allt Coire a' Ghiubhais, where it flows into Lochan Loin nan Dubhach. This small stream we carefully followed for about a mile—only too glad to have some sure guide. Shortly a flash revealed to us clearly the broad expanse of Ericht, and we decided to steer in that line as best we could. This proved a very troublesome bit of work, for the heather is deep and the ground exceedingly rough, and many a tumble we had. After half-an-hour of this going, we reached the shore of the loch. The rain had now stopped somewhat, and, though we were simply wringing, the exertions of pulling through the long heather had made us very warm and fatigued. Arrived at the loch we felt comparatively sure of making out Benalder Cottage—“Benalder Lodge” in the unrevised one-inch map. The west shore of the loch consists of large boulders and shingle, and, immediately beyond, deep heather. We tried both, but eventually took to jumping from stone to stone along the shore as best we could. Presently we saw a large object on our left standing out in the darkness, and making for it we found it to be a house, or rather a small wooden hut. At once we concluded it must be M'Cook, the forester's at Benalder Cottage, and we were surprised to find all in darkness, as we had warned him we should arrive that night. We walked round, groping for the door, and eventually found it. We knocked; but got no reply. We must have made a mistake, and so we resumed our jumping process on the boulders along the shore. Continuing this disagreeable and tedious advance for some ten minutes or so, we were agreeably surprised to find, on rounding a foreland, the glimmer of a distant light, and aided by another grand flash we could now take in the whole

situation. Here were Alder Bay and M'Cook's house on the hillside at last. But our troubles were not quite ended yet, for between us and the welcome light lay the Uisge Aulder—a mere stream usually, but now a raging torrent. We walked up this stream from the loch side, endeavouring to find a fording place; but, though dark, the roar of the water told us that we should probably search in vain. At length we found a fixed plank which we traversed astraddle, and very carefully. At ten minutes past midnight—the river crossed—we were shaking hands with Mrs. M'Cook, who had quite abandoned any hope that we had started. She had thoughtfully put a lamp in her window, and thus given us a guide for two miles almost. But for this we should certainly never have found the cottage, for somehow we had got into our heads the idea that it was much nearer the loch side than was actually the case. Mrs. M'Cook was sole occupant, her husband having very kindly gone out with a lantern to look for us towards the Dalwhinnie direction, having mistaken our starting-point.

Under the lamplight, and before the roaring peat fire we were sorry-looking beings in all conscience—soaked from head to foot, smeared with mud by our many falls in the bogs, and our eyes blinking in the strong light like those of an owl that has suddenly been surprised by the light. But the good lady of the house supplied us with hot tea, and, after a sumptuous meal, we got into bed, while Mrs. M'Cook devoted her attentions equally to turning our soaking garments before the fire, and to a *Scotsman* which we had been able to transport with us comparatively intact. At 3.15 a.m. we were roused, and, stiff and sleepy, we struggled into our still wet clothes. Refreshed by warm tea and a light breakfast, things became more cheerful. At 3.45 we bade adieu to our kind hostess, and betook ourselves to the slopes behind the house, keeping the burn on our left. It was now daylight, of course, but it was again pouring very hard, and the mist rolled round us on all sides, so that our view was practically as limited as during the night. It was a question now whether we should tackle the Ben and possibly lose our

way, or keep the loch side and make sure of our train at Dalwhinnie. But the temptation was too great, so on we went, knowing that as long as we kept to the burn we must ascend, so far at any rate, in the right direction. We passed Prince Charlie's "Cave". How many had he in Scotland can anyone say? It is merely a collection of huge boulders huddled together among a luxuriant growth of brackens. We could find no separate "chambers" referred to by Mr. Clarke, but we confess that there was no temptation to make a careful investigation. We were Jacobite enough, however, to heave a sigh for the poor Prince if he had to take refuge in such a place—were it only from the elements.

We continued in a north-easterly direction, following the burn to its source. At this point the weather was very thick, and, with the disappearance of the stream, we had to make another appeal to our map, and set our compass for some new landmark. How it poured here! We felt very wretched, and in a forlorn condition proceeded to steer very slowly in a northerly direction, and so ascended in a slanting course the slope, which, up till now, we had climbed face on. We had no aneroid, but I should say the burn ended about the 2750 line. Very soon we came on more gentle slopes and stony ground, and reached what was undoubtedly the edge of the steep rock-face which drops into the Bealach Beithe. Once here the trouble ends for a time, because, to reach the top, this ridge must be followed for about three-quarters of a mile, the summit cairn (3757) being some 50 or 60 yards in from the ridge at that distance. Cheered with these thoughts (excellent in theory), we went on in faith, keeping well to the ridge, but always taking sufficient care not to venture too near the edge from which the mists came surging up in long black masses, and mingled with the whiter cloud which scoured the slopes to the left, clearly showing that there were considerable depths below. As we followed the ridge we passed several little cairns, which are marked in the six-inch map, and are 3531 feet, 3597 feet, 3577 feet, and 3503 feet respectively at the top

of the Sron Bhealaich Bheithe. Past the last of these cairns we had nothing to remark till we reached the top of a very fine gully which apparently led down to the Garbh Choire. We should now be very near *the* cairn, and it was time to keep a sharp look-out in the driving mist which might readily prevent its detection. Still we went on, but no signs of it, and, as we began a gradual descent, we had surely passed it. So we turned, and, keeping in from the ridge a bit, came back in the direction we had come. The wind, previously on our backs, now came straight at us, which, with driving sleet, made a sharp look-out difficult. However, in a very few minutes after we had "wheeled about", we saw an insignificant cairn for which we made a rush, and which, by its insignia of broken bottles, old meat cans, and other signs of civilisation, convinced us that it must be *the* cairn. Here I may devote a few words to the general lie of the mountain.

Standing at the cairn, and looking south, one should see the gently-sloping ridge by which we had come up. It drops precipitously into the great corrie on the left, and slopes away in a broad plateau to the right, reminding one very much of the top of Braeriach, and all the more so on account of the little stone men dotted all along the crest. Looking south-east the precipitous northern face of Beinn Bheoil, on the other side of the Bealach, should stand out prominently. In a north-easterly direction again a continuation of the ridge which we had just quitted should carry us along to the top of the Garbh Choire Bheag, and so on by a series of corries till Coire Gleadhreach Beag is reached. And lastly, to the north and west, who can tell what one might not have seen, from the great unshapely masses of Creag Meaghaidh on Loch Laggan-side to the great Ben himself. But a heavy hailstorm was not calculated to develop our imagination, so we made a rush for the ridge again and crawled under a ledge from which we watched the hailstones pattering on the rocks without, and then rolling over into the corrie beneath us. In this primitive shelter we partook of a second "breakfast", which consisted of sandwiches done to a pulp by the rain, and a few figs and

raisins. As we devoured this, the weather improved considerably, and a sudden rent in the cloud showed us Loch a' Bhealaich Bheithe, and another, shortly after, the far north end of Loch Ericht itself. We took courage, and at 7.45 we began to descend into the steaming depths of the corrie. A few fair "pitches" are to be found here, and possibly all along the corrie face.

Our expedition was really made to find out what sort of climbs (if any) were to be had in the corrie, but, so far as we could make out, they were not of a very high-class order. We would fain have made some practical experiments, but, having been so handicapped with the weather and consequent loss of time, we keep prominently in view our train and the unknown ground still to be covered.

Loch a' Bhealaich Bheithe reached, a grand spectacle awaited us. The darkness of the night and chilly morning hours were replaced by the cheering rays of the morning sun, which (as Mr. Virgil would have put it) reached the very marrow of our bones. The entire corrie was lit up with the eastern sun, and relieved by great bands of white mist slowly rising and floating over the corrie on to the plateau we had just quitted. At the south end of the loch there is a fine gully or chimney from which the Allt Bealach springs and flows into the loch. Again, at the extreme north end of the corrie, there are two magnificent buttresses which are referred to in an early volume of the *S.M.C. Journal*. These two buttresses loyally guard the left-hand side of the entrance to the Bealach Dubh, and, looking back on them from near Loch Pattack, they have a most imposing appearance. Having admired this great view, we reluctantly left the north end of the loch, and hurried along the burn from the loch to the point where it joins the Culrea Burn, where we struck a fairly good path which we followed to Loch Pattack, where we turned sharply to the right. At this loch we had another halt. The view here certainly repaid us for the discomfort of the night. The waters of Pattack sparkled at our feet, and in the east the morning mist rolled up the sides of the Western Cairn-



gorms and revealed them in all their rich and characteristic blueness, only seen at this season after heavy and continued rain. Again, looking back, our vanquished peak was now wide-awake, and displayed himself and his sunlit corries by way of a special favour. At this point the two sentinel buttresses and the Bealach Dubh corrie beyond impressed us very much, and, had weather and time permitted, we should certainly have explored them before leaving.

At 10 a.m. we reached Lochericht Lodge, but—less fortunate than Mr. Clarke and his party—no “vessel” was in waiting to take us the remaining six miles of our journey. All was silence on this bright Sunday morning, and no signs were showing that the forester had yet betaken himself from the Land of Nod.

At 11.30 we were in the waiting-room at Dalwhinnie station, getting into the contents of a very important parcel which we had sent on to await us. As we steamed south that glorious afternoon, we said farewell to the distant Ben, of which we caught a glimpse soon after leaving the station, standing out clear and blue at the far end of the loch. At 5.30 p.m. we were once more under the shadow of Arthur's Seat, having been away only about twenty-six hours.