

'TWIXT LOCH ERICHT AND STRATH OSSIAN.

BY JAMES H. BROWN.

I FOREGATHERED with a stalwart Clubman on a mid-summer holiday at Dalwhinnie, and we proceeded to the little piers near the head of Loch Ericht with the view of engaging a boat and rowers to take us to the far end. A strong south-west wind was blowing through a pretty thick rain, the loch was in no little commotion, and its gorge, filled with dark mist, looked not unlike a tunnel full of smoke. Fortunately we found no one hardy (or foolish) enough to embark with us, so we had to spend the night at Dalwhinnie.

The following morning was almost as uninviting, but both rain and mist ultimately cleared off. After some persistence, we secured an excellent boat with an experienced rower and a youngster. Baggage and provisions all aboard, we were afloat by noon, though it required some persuasion to get our crew to start. Probably it was more on our account than his own that the boatman recommended another day at Dalwhinnie; even when we did push off from the pier we found out later that we were expected to cry *Peccavi*, or its Gaelic equivalent. But there is no turning back for the Cairngorm Club; its programmes have always been duly carried out.

The boat shipped considerable quantities of water, for far as the eye could penetrate "white horses" were in evidence. Progress was extremely slow, sometimes almost imperceptible; the anticipated "delightful row" was a grim contest with wind and water. Half-a-dozen times at least we had to seek the shelter of tiny bays, or land to bail out the boat. Indeed at one stage we had seriously to consider the propriety of pitching our camp for the night, and resuming the voyage next day in more propitious weather. The passengers—at least one of them—had to take turn at the oars, though the stalwart did not

excel, to put it mildly, as a rower. Indeed, except for two very short "turns", he lay at full length on the softer baggage, showing his confidence in the result by sleeping a great part of the time, to which circumstance the writer is indebted for several extra blisters.

An interesting incident of our toilsome voyage was the appearance of a vessel, with furniture for a shooting-box, towed by two strong ghillies, assisted by an oarsman and a steersman. It was inspiring to see the towers as they jumped from boulder to boulder, half-walking, half-running through water, sometimes knee-deep. Ultimately, as we hugged the shore, we were overtaken by a shepherd who came aboard, leaving his dogs to follow on land. He gave us no small assistance, ending by bowing us into his humble cottage with Celtic grace and dignity. We were regaled by the women of the house with scones and milk; seldom have we enjoyed Highland welcome and hospitality more than we did on this occasion. We could only leave Stevenson's "Kipnapped" as a memento, not altogether inappropriate, of our visit.

Our toil was now practically over, for although we had still several miles to put behind us, the wind had fallen and the water was smooth and glassy. The lofty hills seemed more imposing in the twilight; and stars appeared and cast their reflection on the loch. The only signs of life were an owl flying overhead and a fox prowling on an adjacent ridge; while the rhythmic "cluck, cluck" of the oars alone broke the impressive stillness of the night. After a voyage of about twelve hours we reached our pre-arranged camping-ground. We had no lack of lunches during our compulsory rests ashore; now we had a great meal together—a combination of dinner and supper. We all felt we had earned it.

The following morning was dull, but to the hills would we, our boat landing us at Alder Bay. Keeping by the burn which passes Prince Charlie's Cave (familiar to the Club), we crossed over the watershed to Loch a' Bhealach Beithe. We clambered along the cliffs at the north-west end, and so had a fine view of the magnificent buttresses

of Ben Alder. Striking into Garbh Choire we began the ascent of the Ben over scree and boulders, but were overtaken by rain. A friendly boulder opportunely presented itself, under which we stretched ourselves for nearly an hour till the sun broke out. We resumed the ascent by the channel of the little stream, Allt a' Gharbh-choire, which comes down the corrie—a route which requires some caution. It is rather steepish, there are many loose stones, and some of the footholds are treacherous. Near the top we diverged to the right, and in a few minutes were at the cairn.

Holding westwards we dropped into the path near the Sluggan, and so descended to Loch Ericht, where our boatman was in waiting. The youngster had not been idle, for the camp was now in apple-pie order, and dinner was ready, the *pièce de resistance* being trout fresh from burns and loch.

Sgor Iutharna (c. 3400) ("Hell's Peak") was our objective for the second day. Setting out in lovely weather, we made for the Bealach Dubh. Striking up Allt Loch an Sgoir, the burn from Loch an Sgoir, we soon reached this fine mountain tarn, which is guarded by rocky precipices at the upper end. The gullies are rather overdrawn in the six-inch map, whereas Sgor Iutharna itself has scant justice. We leisurely lunched by the loch-side, and seldom is it given to hillmen to take a meal in better weather and more impressive surroundings. As we lolled on the heather we heard the bark of a hind apparently so near that we resolved on a "stalk". After some rather uncomfortable crawling, we found ourselves behind a big boulder on the other side of which, we were certain, lay Madame. How cautiously we "swarmed" up that boulder and peered down—and saw nothing! Stalking by sound was a failure, and there was even an end of the barking.

We retraced our steps about half-way down the burn, and started the climb of the Sgor from the west. At first the slope is grassy, but soon there is abundance of rotten rock of mica-schist and quartz. Thereafter one begins to realise the appropriateness of the name as well as the more

modern "Lancet edge"; one feels as if upon the edge of an immense cone divided in two. The side next the loch looks exceedingly precipitous, the opposite side, to the Bealach Dubh, has an easier slope, but still at a very steep angle. Hands as well as feet have to be used in the upper part—each pinnacle, as usual in such positions, seeming the last. Halts were necessarily frequent, and allowed the depths to be duly appreciated, but at last we stepped on to the grassy sward of the summit. We made the descent by one of the head streams of the Uisge Labhrach, and so returned home to our little camp.

The following day we traversed the broad stretch of wet but interesting moor that lay between us and Sgor Gaibhre (3128) ("Goats' Hill"). Skeletons of deer were, alas, not rare, and hinds with their fawns were numerous. The latter were at a frolicsome age, and not altogether disinclined to hold converse with us. But their mothers "kept their distance"; even when within 200 or 300 yards their colour so blended with the moor that there was difficulty in seeing them without a glass. The Loch Ericht front of the hill has a somewhat peaked appearance, and near the top we came on a foxes' den, where a vixen and her family had evidently recently been raided. The rain, which had been our companion all morning, was now succeeded by a thick mist, and, save a peep of Loch Ossian, we had none of the fine view which is said to be got from Sgor Gaibhre. On the homeward journey we paid a visit to Lochan a' Bhealaich, a moss tarn, loved of trout, and surrounded by heather. Inconvenient although it often is, what would the mountains be without mist! The day at last brightened, and we were favoured with grand dissolving views of long strips of white fleecy clouds.

Our delightful mountain holiday was now drawing to an end; the last day added two, Aonach Beag (3646) and Beinn Eibhinn (3611), to our "bag" of peaks. We had a fine view of the Glencoe mountains and Ben Nevis; a little down the western slope we had all Strath Ossian spread before us, as well as a portion of the Spean valley. Uisge Labhrach appears, at a distance, to fall into Loch

Ossian, but just stops short and turns to the north. On the Saddle between the two tops we came on a horse-shoe carefully placed on a stone. We learned afterwards that it had been there for many years. On this occasion—the first during these mountain rambles—we espied two human beings, one of them evidently a botanist. We discussed the position of the nearest railway station, and as they did not seem inclined to say where they had started from that morning we were equally uncommunicative on the situation of our tent.

The last morning was devoted to packing-up. Leaving the boat with the baggage to follow leisurely, we had a brisk walk to Dalwhinnie. The loch was at its best; there were many fishermen out with boats, not a few ladies plying the rod. The high hills with their birch and pine-clad slopes, Ben Alder towering over all, made a picture which it will take some time to efface from our memories.