

MISADVENTURES ON THE CAIRNGORMS.

BY ERNEST A. BAKER, M.A.

THE inexperienced Englishman, used to mountaineering in the Lake District or the West Highlands, where the hotels are considerably less than forty miles apart, may well regard a holiday in the wild region of the Cairngorms as a somewhat formidable undertaking. A look at the map, with its vast spaces of meandering contours, vacant of any hospitable black dots or inviting road-marks, makes him rejoice, on the one hand, to see what a large slice of Great Britain still remains virtually in a primeval state, while, on the other hand, he cannot help reflecting how pleasant an adjunct to mountain scenery are the dinners and breakfasts, the comfortable beds and pleasant company of Wastdale Head and Sligachan, the very things that in the Cairngorms are most inaccessible. It is in such a region that the services of a friend practically acquainted with the topography, and versed in the arts of converting hard-grained foresters to charitable views upon "access to mountains", and of eliciting the hospitality of their wives, are something to be warmly welcomed. Albeit this advantage hardly insures one against all the accidents of travel in rough country, the chances of a night out, of going a long day on an empty stomach, or of mistakes due to mist. Both with the experienced guide and without him, I have met with several of those adventures in the Cairngorms that are agreeable only when we come to look back on them from a comfortable distance.

When, some years ago, a Cairngormer asked me to join him in a dash across from Glen Tilt to Rothiemurchus, I assented gladly, hoping to profit hugely in future visits by the knowledge gained under his tuition. We started from Blair Atholl one morning, in what my friend's diary described as "golden weather". The Tilt was low and

pellucid, the hills were so clear in the sunlight as to lose somewhat of their apparent stature. At a cottage below Marble Lodge, we met one of the earliest specimens I became acquainted with of that fine race of men, the Highland foresters, a stalwart clan whose good graces it is well to cultivate if you would fain wander at ease in the recesses of the Eastern Grampians.

My companion professed some acquaintance with the Gaelic. Being a little sceptical, I suggested as an opportunity to exhibit his skill that he should say "Good-morning" to a youngster whom we met a little further on. The young Celt stared in a frightened manner at my friend mouthing his gibberish, and then took to his heels. We did not produce any more "Gaelic" after this. We saw no other person till we had walked up the whole length of Glen Tilt, and were crossing the forlorn stretch of boggy land at the watershed. We were now pretty tired, after a hot day's journey. Just as we saw, far, far away, two solitary cottages, like specks on the vast mountainous landscape, we caught sight also of two figures a mile ahead, hastening in the same direction as we. Were they bound on the same errand, namely, to secure a bed at one of the two cottages, the only bed, indeed, that my friend knew of for many miles? The idea made us hurry on, although to try to catch them up was vain. However, we found no other guests in possession when we reached the forester's house, and we were made very comfortable, though one bed in the wall had to accommodate the pair of us.

My companion had been talking a good deal about the attractions of that cheapest of Highland hostels, the Shelter Stone by Loch Avon, and the inspiration came to me that we might as well spend a night there, and so see more of the mountains than if we crossed through the Larig in one day. We decided to do this, if the next day were fine; and in the morning our hostess was asked if she could furnish us with the necessary provisions. She soon got together a miscellaneous collection of edibles, oatcakes, bread, scones, butter, bacon, tea, salt fish, etc.

As our bags were hardly roomy enough for a camping-out expedition, all these things were packed in a large brown-paper parcel, and tied to my knapsack.

We began to climb Ben Muich Dhui by the steep but-tress overlooking Allt Clach nan Taillear. It was hot, and this route is one of the driest. Snow gleamed all around us, in the channel of the burn, and in every cleft and gully of the walls enclosing the Garbh-choire behind us. A parching thirst was exasperated by the sight of coolness and moisture a stone's throw away but practically out of reach.

From the cairn we enjoyed one of the clearest views I ever obtained from a 4000 feet top. We slaked our thirst at a well not far distant, then crossed the slopes towards the rocky descent to Loch Avon. This is a perfectly easy descent, very different indeed from the blood-curdling description to be read in a certain romance. But you must not wander too far at the side, as I did. My comrade, self-absorbed, was leaving me to my own devices (divers purple patches in his journal, and a sonnet to boot, were the probable explanation), and he allowed me to skirt the torrent too closely. This nearly proved fatal to the comestibles, for, suddenly slipping at an awkward ledge, I recovered myself, but the brown-paper parcel burst, and sent its contents rolling far and wide. We were lucky enough to collect everything almost undamaged, and continued our way more sedately to the Shelter Stone. An impertinent entry in the journal was to the effect, that "Baker was more delighted at saving the grub than at his own escape". Being unprovided with any sort of cooking-pan, we hunted up the best specimens of old meat tins and biscuit canisters that lay on what might be termed the kitchen-midden, and after scouring them with gravel in the stream hard by, so thoroughly that two or three were ground into holes, we produced two serviceable utensils, and at once set about getting dinner.

By the time we had rested and dined, it was early evening. We proposed to ascend Cairngorm, but, despite

the perfect morning, a heavy shower delayed us. Then we set out to climb the gully that sends down a long tail of rock and scree just opposite our lodging. As a rock climb, this does not rank high; where the rocks are bare, it is too easy to be interesting, whereas, near the top, it is earthy, and after the rain we found this part so wet and slippery, that we were glad to make a safe exit. The climb occupied us a longer time than we had bargained for, and the sun had set when we reached Cairngorm top. We spent a few minutes gazing around on the vast and solemn landscape on which the shadows were gathering swiftly, then a sprinkling of rain fell, evidently the forerunner of a heavy shower, and we ran as fast as we could down the stony sides into Coire Raibert and regained the shore of Loch Avon, well-nigh in darkness, by a very rough descent a long way to the east of our gully. The rain had soaked us, and we had not a change of clothes between us. We kindled the fire again almost in the cave mouth, and tried to dry our things, but the main result was, that for a while we were smoked out of our hole. The night that ensued on this scorching day was remarkably cold; it was difficult to keep warm inside the shelter, though we utilised everything, down to pieces of brown paper, in lieu of coverlet.

There was not much lying abed in the morning. A dense mist overlay everything about 100 feet above our heads, the loch was clear from end to end, but we knew well what to expect on top. We ascended by the margin of the burn that tumbles into the Garbh Uisge, and made as straight a line as we could to the W.N.W., crossing several beds of snow. We must have gone farther to the left than we intended, for we presently found ourselves on the brink of a precipice, close to a fine pinnacle which we identified later as Creag na Leacainn. There was no way here for us; we bore away south, my comrade's knowledge of the locality only sufficing to warn us that we were on the edge of the Larig's deep chasm. Fearing more cliffs below, we would not venture down the steep slopes that skirted the Creag, but returned to the top, and, after

more wandering, found a way off the mountain between Creag na Leacainn and Creag a' Chalamain. When we found ourselves actually coming down, and apparently safe from the crags that had seemed to beset every step on that misty plateau up above, we had time to bethink us that we were hungry; but the stock of provender had been reduced to three hard-boiled eggs, which we divided punctiliously.

We were descending rapidly now, and the merry tinkle of a stream below grew louder and louder, until, suddenly, the mist thinned, our surroundings became visible, and, to our delight, we found an unmistakable track. Saved! was my instant thought, but to my surprise my comrade looked doubtful at this sign of human neighbourhood, and at length said he was sure this was not the Larig. For me to have any opinion, or at least to express one, on such a matter, was of course absurd, so I bowed to his local experience when he said our best course was to follow the stream down the glen until we came to something or other of a less dubious nature. It was the Larig after all, and anybody who knows the character of the ground traversed by the burn from the foot of Castle Hill to Auldrue, will appreciate our sufferings in fighting a way through such a virgin tract. All the while it was raining, and the drenched vegetation sprinkled us bountifully at every step. Nor when we regained the track were our troubles over, for my conductor got mixed up about the bridges at Auldrue. Instead of keeping straight on to the bridge below the confluence with the Bennie, he crossed the Larig burn, and, seeing the other stream confronting us, plunged in without delay and forded it. The stream was high, but my long-shanked friend cared nothing for that, though I was afraid of being swept away, and even after our previous drenching, I found myself appreciably the wetter for this operation.

Such was my first experience of the Cairngorms. A friend at home was so interested by our account of the expedition, of the proceedings at the Shelter Stone particularly, that he came north with me about a year later,

bent on finding out by a night there, whether the Stone was really so comfortable as we made out. We reached Aviemore by the afternoon train. We bought some provisions at the store, but, by an unlucky chance, we could not obtain any bread. The seriousness of this did not dawn on us at first, and we hoped to make shift with a few scones and a stock of oatcake that we got in Rothiemurchus. Laden with provender and with fuel, gathered in the forest for culinary purposes, we did not reach the top of the ridge by way of Creag na Leacainn till the sun was disappearing; we descended into the crag-girt basin of Loch Avon, over deep snow-wreaths, in twilight; and it was about as dark as it ever gets in a mid-June night when we came to the Stone. We had invented a beautiful cooking-pan—kettle, saucepan, fryingpan, and teapot all in one—whose virtues we now put to the test; and when we had made the beds and prepared supper, there was but one drawback to our happiness, the dearth of bread. The eeriness of the situation took hold of my friend's imagination—I believe it was that, though it may have been the food—and he slept very poorly. The scones were soon eaten up, and the oatcake proved to be stale and dry, about as toothsome as confections of sawdust. At breakfast, when we nearly came to eating our bacon-fat with a spoon, we began to realise why bread is such an important element in the national diet. Vainly did we argue that fat is the most concentrated form of energy; we preferred our energy in a sandwich. We looked at our boots, they were obviously in need of dubbin; so we put the bacon-fat on our boots, and trusted that the energy was not in the wrong place after all.

We were afoot before 6 a.m., but my companion was indisposed, and anxious to get back to more comfortable quarters at once. So we crossed Cairn an Lochain and descended as directly as possible into the Pass, where I put my friend on the right track for Rothiemurchus and started alone up the steep side of Braeriach. I traversed all the 4000 feet tops round to Cairn Toul, and dropped down at the head of Loch Eunach, a good day's work on

next to nothing to eat; for the oatcake, which had spoiled our breakfast, was still more trying in the form of sandwiches. It was on the summit rock of Cairn Toul, this day, that I made the acquaintance of Mr. A. L. Bagley, now a well-trying mountaineering friend; he had, unseen, been in my wake for several hours and met me, as I came down from the cairn, in one of the loneliest spots in all Britain.

Many readers of this journal will remember the depressing weather that spoiled the festivities on Jubilee Day, 1897. Two men, of whom I was one, thought it would be an excellent way to see the bonfires if we spent the night on a mountain-top. We selected Beinn a' Ghlo as a central summit, unmindful of the sinister omen conveyed in the name, the "mountain of the mist". We had been so impressed by the difficulties of getting provisions in the remoter Highlands, that we had brought from town a weighty collection of tinned meats, tea, coffee, fruit, and many other things, the bulk of which had gone further on by train when we set out from Blair Atholl. To these necessaries my comrade, who was new to the mountaineering profession, had indiscreetly added a little arsenal of things that might possibly come in useful. He had no notion of cutting away to the vanishing point everything that swells the rucksack, which is the fine art of travel and camping-out. His piece of soap reminded one of a hard day's washing, he had a good many yards of bandages suitable for all sorts of contusions and breakages, a dozen clean handkerchiefs, and so on in proportion. But somehow, throughout this journey in various parts of Scotland, we seemed to be lugging our provisions just to those places where plenty reigned; while, if by chance we found ourselves ten miles away from anywhere and desperately hungry, the "tommy bag" was sure to be empty. Some of those tinned meats actually went back by train as they had come, and we had very little satisfaction for carrying 20 pounds on our backs where roads are unknown. Bitterly did we regret our lack of improvidence.

We had barely reached the top of Carn Liath's

stubborn slope, when the mist fell upon us and held us in its fell clutches until, after several hours of resistance, we fled from its ancient sanctuary. One could grope one's way in the dark along the narrow ridge that connects the first peak with that higher one with the name of portentous length. You know the poet's hexameter—

“Something outlandish, Braigh something, Braigh-Choire, he believed,
Chruim Bhalgain.”

But find the ultimate summit we could not; and late in the day, disappointed, wet, and tired, we descended the valley of Allt Fheannach into Glen Tilt, and pushed on through drenching rain over the col into Glen Dee,

“Heedless of scenery, heedless of bogs, and of perspiration.”

We spent Jubilee night at our old quarters, and hoped for better luck next day; but the weather remained as bad as ever till midday, and we durst not set out, as we had designed, to cross the hills through the Larig Ghru. Nevertheless, we could not stay here; there were trains to catch, and engagements to keep in the west. Why not, then, try to get to the Highland Railway by way of Glen Feshie? This plan we discussed with the old forester, who thought it was feasible, but observed that a bridge had been washed away on a tributary of the Feshie a good many months ago, and he had not heard that it had been replaced. We thought little of this information at the time, and set off for Insh as gaily as the depressing aspect of everything would allow. The country separating Glen Geldie from Glen Feshie is a dreary morass, with a track crossing it—on the map. The map, indeed, says, “Glen Geldie path indistinct”; it ought to have said “non-existent”. For an hour or two we were practically at sea, navigating through mist and rain across a desolate, featureless waste; and when we had steered across the final stretch of quaking bogs and miry pools, without being engulfed, and came in sight of the Feshie, we fondly hoped that we had put the worst behind us. But the adventure had only just begun. Anon we came to the

Eidart, the big affluent to the Feshie that drains the western slopes of Cairn Toul; it was in spate, and the track ended abruptly just over a tumbling rapid. Now we remembered that somebody had said something about a bridge that had been washed away. Were we to be obliged, after all, to go back to Glen Dee? We walked up stream to the falls, and tried to nerve ourselves to the desperate measure of jumping the granite ravine, down which the pent-up stream rushes with thunder and fury. Then we returned to the junction of the two rivers, and took the inevitable step. We forded the Feshie. But it was not long before we realised that our position on the wrong side of the glen was an impossible one, for the mountains soon close in, and the glen becomes a ravine. Only one thing remained to be done; we must ford the Feshie again, below the junction; so, choosing a spot where the river, doubled in volume, spread itself broad and shallow, in we went, and after a long, stern struggle, regained the northside track.

It was getting late when we arrived, drenched from head to foot, at the first dwellings, the "Huts". There a hospitable fisherman met us and asked us in, giving us complicated instructions as to the nearest way to Insh. He also gave us a dram of fine old Glenlivet. For some reason he offered it in wine-glasses, neat, and the fiery liquid wreaked such destruction on my vocal passages, that for some time my efforts to speak were something like the chirp of a sparrow with a bad cold. Perhaps the hours of gloaming and darkness that we spent hunting the wet moorlands for the missing township of Insh, were as trying a part of the day's experiences as any. We found the place at a quarter before midnight; and, though we had great difficulty in securing an entrance at the cosy little inn, being mistaken for toppers in quest of illegal drinks, we had nothing to complain of when we got inside.

About a year later the ambitious plans of three climbers were likewise turned to derision by the Cairngorm weather. We had foolishly sent changes of clothes, the ropes, and even our climbing boots, forward to

Braemar, without ascertaining from the authorities whether a succession of fine days would allow us to go and fetch them. Scarcely had we reached the foot of the hills, when such mists and rains descended as sent us "bootless home and weatherbeaten back". We wired for our missing equipments; and one day, in the meantime, after a morning of rain, we set out, ropeless, to try to climb the rocky face of Sgoran Dubh. Some fine scrambling fell to our lot, but the mist swallowed us up, and the result was, that we got badly pounded, just before nightfall, on the crags under the summit of Sgor Gaoith, and had extreme difficulty in extricating ourselves by a climb down a rugged watercourse. During the ascent an accident occurred that might have ended seriously. One of the three, climbing recklessly ahead, sent down some hundred-weights of loose stones right over the others, who escaped destruction by the bigger fragments almost by a miracle.

But this paper is growing lengthy, and such other adventures and misadventures as we met with on that holiday were chiefly of the kind that require time to bring out their latent charms. Therefore, I will reserve them for a future chronicle. As to the incidents of my last visit to that delightful region, our efforts to find a good rock-climb on crumbly granite, and the stormy night we spent at the top of the Larig Ghru, my companion, Mr. Puttrel, is, I believe, doing them justice. Whether, after so many mistakes and failures (I will not call them misfortunes entirely), we are wiser men, is still a moot point, only to be settled by our conduct on future expeditions.