

THE CLUB AT CLOCHNABEN.

BY WILLIAM SKEA.

THE Club visited Clochnaben (1900) on the Spring Holiday. There are many landmarks in the north-east of Scotland visible alike to the mariner and to the pedestrian. Clochnaben is one of those, and, therefore, an object of curiosity to all; while to the hill-climbing fraternity it is a legitimate object of investigation. The "stone on the hill", or "stone of the woman", is a huge stack of weather-worn and fractured granite on the summit of the "ben." The rocks stand 95 feet up from the ridge, and are 270 paces in circumference at their base. It is not a great mountain, although essentially attractive as a landmark. On his many journeys up Deeside to Balmoral, the late Right Hon. W. E. Gladstone invariably set himself to look for Clochnaben when the train drew near to Banchory. On a certain occasion he was questioned by one of his travelling companions as to his interest in this hill; when he replied that the sight of Clochnaben always made him feel near home! He probably referred to the fact that this hill is an outlying part of the estate of Fasque which belongs to a member of the Gladstone family. Be this as it may, the members of the Club, who visited Clochnaben on the 5th of May, did not experience this home-like feeling. The weather was wintry. Nevertheless about thirty members left Aberdeen for Banchory, whence they drove through Strachan to Glen of Dye. The drive was not unpleasant. To look down upon good, well-driven horses doing their work easily is one of the genuine pleasures of life. The main features of the district are sylvan, agricultural, and sporting (*i.e.*, moorland). Of homesteads there are few, but all of these are "trig", and their precincts and the cultivated land bear unmistakable evidence of industry, energy, and skill. The sylvan scenery

begins at Banchory, and is charmingly romantic on the banks of the Feugh at Inverey, the seat of a scion of an ancient family, the Douglasses of Tilquihilly. The trees were reluctantly showing their buds, but everywhere they were fresh and bonnie. The moorlands were "a study in black and white"—the white being heavy wreaths of snow among the heather.

The ascent of the ben was made by what is known as "The Miller's Bog", and the course mapped out was that of "The Aquaduct", the start being made from behind the Glen Dye Shooting Lodge. The "Aquaduct" is an excellent example of the native energy and dogged perseverance of the Scot. It is a narrow but effective stream of water, or "lead", artificially constructed, and reaches from the southern shoulder of Clochnaben down into Glen Dye, crossing in its course, of several miles, two deep ravines by means of leaky, wooden aqueducts, supported by struts of the same material. There never was any royal road to a hilltop, and while we commend the aqueduct route as the safest in winter for a mixed party of mountaineers, accompanied by ladies, yet we think a bee line from "the gate" to the "Cloch" (although here and there wet ground would be met with) would shorten the ascent by at least forty minutes. On this occasion the climb to the summit occupied fully two hours. There were frequent showers of snow, and detours to avoid wet ground. One had often to take to the heather, which, being rank and woody, did not afford a "progressive" foothold. The wind at the summit was bitterly cold, with frequent showers of snow. But the keen, cutting effects of the storm were modified when the lower rocks of the "Cloch" had been scaled. There, in view of the nearer surrounding hills and the moorland—there is no distant view—one experienced the grateful *shelter* (*shadow* there was none) of "a great rock in a weary land"! When all the members of the party had climbed into this perch of shelter from the stormy blast, a meeting of the Club was held under the presidency of Mr. Wm. Porter, who had been asked to officiate for the Chairman (Mr. Harvey), who was absent.

Half an hour finished the business, and, the return having been arranged, the company divided into two parties. One, under the guidance of Mr. Alex. Copland, returned southward to Glen Dye Lodge, where they joined the vehicles; the other, under the guidance of Mr. Robert Anderson, after visiting the minor "Cloch", descended by the north side of the hill. The descent was not easy. For twenty minutes a perfect blizzard prevailed, and, what with heavy snow-wreaths and the blinding snow, some time was lost. When the tempest abated, a look around showed that the party had taken what sailors call too much "eastering", and the course was at once altered. Soon thereafter the Greendams Burn was struck and forded, a movement which led on to what is called the "peat road". Here, at least, was a track that we knew led towards our "objective"; but what had probably been a road before the winter came upon it, was now a series of detached *bits* of road. At short intervals this road was literally cut out of existence by torrents from the high land—not scored, but cut to a depth of, at least in one case where we took the trouble to measure, over four feet—through sand and clay and shingle, down to the bare rock. There is no other road within miles of the place, and who is to mend it? let Fasque and Finzean decide; but whoever does so has his work cut out for him. Before leaving sight of Clochnaben (indeed it would be difficult to do so within the next five miles right ahead), let us say that, bleak as Clochnaben was on that 5th of May, it was impossible to deny the prospects it offered to the sportsman. Grouse rose and "cocked" away from our very feet sometimes—and this at intervals of not more than ten minutes; while of white hares—well, besides single specimens, five were within gunshot at one moment. Of deer we saw none, but four hillmen who had crossed Mount Battock from Glensesk, with whom we foregathered at "mine Inn", told us that they had seen several herds of both stags and hinds within a few miles of where we had been buffeting with the snowstorm. But, to our tale. The peat road had placed

before our eyes the "White Stones" of Feughside Inn, apparently about five miles distant, and thither, with earnest assiduity, we bent our steps. If, as Mr. Johnstone says, "the miles are lang in Sutherland, and, oh, the folk are few!" we can assure him that they are equally so in the parish of Strachan in Kincardineshire. But, with that Feughside Inn in view, onward we strode, through bog and mire, over marsh and deer-fence, over field and furrow, until we reached the turnpike, within biscuit throw of the house of entertainment. To cross a meadow and a bridge of planks leading over the Feugh was a task of five minutes. We had arrived before the Glen Dye Lodge section of the party, and we were received by Mr. Smith and his wife and family literally with open arms. And, when the late comers arrived, we were "as fresh as new paint". Our smiles at their reception were broadened by the sunshine, for the weather had taken "a thocht" and mended. Pen could not tell the merits of that ample Scottish dinner, to which the united party sat down in the cleanly and well furnished Feughside Inn. It was our first acquaintance with the hostelry, yet we are persuaded that the host would have warmed the hearts of the Ettrick Shepherd, Christopher North, ay, and of Sir Walter Scott himself. From road to roof the Feughside Inn is as clean as any west-end city boudoir, the cooking is excellent, the viands abundant, and the attendance—by the bye there were no "waiters"—was that of ladies who seemed to anticipate every want of the guests. Mr. Porter again presided, and, it is needless to say, "all went merry as a marriage bell". The drive back to Banchory in the early evening was rapid and delightful. And after a wait of a few minutes, the train from Ballater drew up, with carriages "Reserved for the Cairngorm Club"—one of the many kind arrangements of Mr. Wm. Deuchar, the indefatigable passenger superintendent of the Great North of Scotland Railway.