

MY EXPERIENCE ON THE CAIRNGORMS.

BY THOMAS RAMSAY.

OWING to the unfortunate postponement of the Coronation ceremonies on 26th June, my plans for that week, like those of many others, were upset. When, therefore, I got an invitation from friends in Aviemore to spend a few days with them, I gladly availed myself of the opportunity of visiting the district.

On Saturday, the 28th June, we made a party to Loch Morlich, and I had my first near view of the Cairngorms. It was a lovely day, and the whole mountain range was unusually clear. The path of the ascent to Cairngorm was pointed out to me, and by the aid of a field-glass I could see a party descending. The position of Ben Muich Dhui was also indicated, and I was so inspired by the scene that I mentally resolved that, if I could so arrange, I would climb both Cairngorm and Ben Muich Dhui.

Accordingly, on Monday (30th) I told my hostess I purposed spending a day on the hills, and though I was urged to take some refreshments with me, declined, expecting to be back in time for dinner. The morning was brilliantly fine, but somewhat sultry. I started at 10 a.m., walking through the Sluggan, and at 11.30 passed Glenmore Lodge.

Though I scarcely halted to look at the scenery while ascending, the view was as fine as any I have ever seen. Loch Morlich was like a sheet of glass, not a breath of wind rippling the surface, and the highest peaks being mirrored in all their grandeur.

At 1.40 I had reached the cairn on Cairngorm, and, after enjoying a look round, took my bearings (though I had no compass or map with me) according to the information I had gleaned on the way, and started without delay for Ben Muich Dhui. While it was quite clear overhead, I noticed mist gathering on the peaks behind, and heard

the rumbling of distant thunder, but I pushed on, as I did not feel inclined to give in while all was clear above. I need not describe the route, as all Clubmen will be familiar with it. Suffice it to say, I hurried on regardless of the evidently approaching storm, but mentally noting my way while plodding through snow-wreath and burn.

I had eaten a biscuit or two which my worthy hostess had slipped into my pocket, and the weather being warm and close, I was overheated by the pace kept up, and naturally feeling very thirsty, I refreshed myself by lapping water from an icy stream, and rather injudiciously, while crossing a wreath, took a handful of frozen snow and involuntarily swallowed it, but at the time felt no ill effect from doing this.

At 3.20 I was at the cairn on Ben Muich Dhui, having tramped 17 miles since I had started. By this time the scene had completely changed. Overhead were dark, ominous-looking clouds, and the mist was gathering on the nearer peaks. Suddenly a flash of lightning gleamed forth, followed instantly by an awful peal of thunder, while down came the rain in torrents such as I had hardly ever experienced. In a few moments I was soaked to the skin, and, as there was no shelter, I immediately started to retrace my way, the thunder, lightning and rain increasing with every step. It was like incessant artillery, and a peculiar heat and sulphurous odour seemed to rise from the ground. I was never before in such a storm. I hurried on, naturally anxious to get back to Cairngorm, but at last I had to give in. The mist had become very dense, and, owing to the heavy clouds, it was much darker than usual before nightfall. I selected the most level piece of ground I could find in the semi-darkness, and made up my mind to go no further, merely confining myself to that plot, and doing "sentry go" there to keep up the heat, as I was chilled to the bone, and shaking from cold, hunger, and wet, besides suffering from the effect of having swallowed the snow.

Night was closing in, but, conscious that it was my foolhardiness that had brought me into this predicament,

I determined to make the best of it. When the weather moderated for a little, I took off my jacket, and wrung out the wet as far as possible. I may mention that I was wearing my kilt.

Through all that night the drizzling rain never ceased. I kept pacing to and fro, swinging my arms across my chest to keep up the circulation, and occasionally lying down, and otherwise doing all I could to pass the weary hours, and once I almost sprained my ankle among the rough stones. I need not dwell upon my feelings during that night. I had not even the consolation of a pipe, everything was so damp. My watch ran down, as I had left my key behind me; and consequently I lost all record of time.

As dawn began to break, I realised I was almost in as sad a plight as during the night. I could not see more than a few yards in front of me, owing to the continued drizzling rain and dense mist. An hour or two thereafter I started to try and find my way to Cairngorm, judging, to the best of my ability, in which direction it lay. I could not recognise any feature of the ground which I had passed over, but by and by I struck a stream, which I followed, till I realised that it fell over a cliff. The weird and eerie sound of this waterfall I had heard in the distance during the night. From what I have since learned, I fancy I must have been near the precipices above Loch Avon. I retraced my steps, and some time thereafter came upon a large boulder, the only one that I had come across which could afford any shelter. Here I decided to rest for a time. When I did sally forth again, I always kept the direction in which the boulder lay in view, so that I could return to its protection, such as it was. I could find no means of descent, however, and more than once nearly lost my way back. The mist lay like a pall around me, and though sometimes it looked as if the sun might break through, I was doomed to disappointment, the rain continuing until, I thought, about 5 o'clock that evening. When occasionally the mist became less dense, the obscured boulders around me

seemed to stand out like so many huge gravestones in a vast cemetery, and my eyes, with the continual strain of gazing into the impenetrable mist and rain, at times felt dimmed, and I imagined that I saw men indistinctly in the distance coming in search of me. I would then get up to make sure if this were so, but, alas! only to be undeceived. The thought would then occur that although a search party came out they might pass quite near without discovering me. This idea caused me several times to stand out and look round, but, never finding anyone, I was tempted to yield to the thought that unless the weather moderated my case was becoming hopeless. My mind was also disturbed about the anxiety of my friends. Of course, the dismal outlook on such a day helped to cause morbid thoughts, but when it cleared the depression passed off, although relief did not seem nearer.

In process of time, I realised that I should have to spend another night on the mountains. As evening approached, a freezing north-east wind began to rise, and as it increased in strength the cold became even more intense—it was excruciating. Looking about, I found a few loose stones, and these I carried to one end of the boulder, and built a little screen to shelter me still further, if possible, from the blast while I crouched below. When getting seriously chilled, I got up and sat in a crevice near by, which shielded my legs a little. This changing of position helped to divert me during the night, and I occasionally dozed.

After break of day on Wednesday (2nd July) morning, the sun occasionally lit up the mist, but as it had done the same the morning before, and never got further through, I feared it might be a repetition of the previous day. However, I came to the conclusion that I must make a final effort to get down. With that intention I left my shelter several times, only to return as the mist still remained. Again I started, and, after going some distance, came upon a grassy and mossy spot, where I sat down, and hoped for the sun to come out. I fell asleep, and on awakening heard the welcome sound of voices. I looked



LOCH PHITULAIS (PITYOULISH).

round, and, with thankfulness, descried two men approaching me from the direction of the boulder where I had spent the night. The relief of seeing some one was great indeed, apart from the satisfaction of knowing that I was saved from further anxiety.

I now learned it was 8 a.m. One of the men was an under-forester—M'Lean. They had been sent as a search party by my friends in Aviemore. Shortly after, the sun broke through the mist, and it turned out a beautiful morning. We made straight for the cairn on Cairngorm, about half-a-mile off, and in the direction in which I had been wending my way.

While descending, we met six other gillies on their way to join in the search. Two men had also gone up from Derry Lodge to Ben Muich Dhui, the forester at Mar Lodge having been wired to send out a search party from there also.

About two hours afterwards we reached Glenmore Lodge, where Mrs. M'Kenzie, the forester's wife, kindly made me a much-needed breakfast. Shortly afterwards, Mr. M'Kenzie brought out his trap, and M'Lean drove me to Achgourish, where, needless to say, my friends gave me a cordial welcome. For two days and nights I had seen no sign of life about me, except one or two ptarmigan, which helped to break the feeling of utter loneliness. Their mournful croak and the eerie noise of the distant waterfall were the only sounds I heard—adding, if anything, to the dreariness of the night. During all that time I had had practically nothing to eat, nor had I taken a flask with me.

I have had an experience I am not likely to forget, and need not moralise on it, as the moral is self-evident, but happily I have been none the worse of my escapade. I may add that, though the kilt may not be an ideal dress for mountain climbing, I must acknowledge that but for the thick folds around my waist I should have fared worse; besides, the pleating kept off the damp more than any other kit would have done.