

TOMINTOUL TO THE SHELTER STONE.

BY GEORGE ANDERSON.

IN making our annual pilgrimage into the fastnesses of the Cairngorms, it has hitherto been our wont to make our approach from Aviemore. Last year we decided upon a change of route, and who can say but that some day we may even desire a change from the Cairngorms themselves, although for the present, they afford us more than our hill-climbing proclivities call for. Consequently on August 8th the writer, accompanied by L—, detrained at Ballindalloch, and having the good fortune to secure seats on the motor just starting for Tomintoul—the horsed vehicle takes four hours on the journey—we arrived at that isolated upland village after ninety minutes run, and in time for a hot lunch. Our stock of provisions purchased and stowed away in our rucksacks, we were soon heading through the village with light hearts and eager steps.

We had intended that our route to Loch Avon should follow the course of the river of that name, but having heard at Tomintoul stories of interdicts and unwelcome receptions given to all and sundry who sought to pass that way beyond Inchrory, we reconsidered our plans. Consequently upon reaching Delnabo, where the Avon and the Water of Ailnack join forces, we “took to the hills” and kept to them through the entire length of our tramp to Loch Avon. We had thus almost from the start left the beaten track, to seek our own way thither with the aid of map and compass.

The day was getting well spent by the time we had placed five or six miles between us and Tomintoul, and our thoughts turned to the question of a shelter for the night. We had resolved to seek it in some sequestered nook or, if necessary, under the protection of a friendly juniper bush, but fortune directed our steps to the foot of Carn Ruadh-bhruaich, where we chanced upon a shepherd's

hut, in which we decided to pass the night. The situation of the hut was decidedly hygienic, and its condition likewise, as we subsequently found when we endeavoured to snatch a few hours' sleep, with the result that Sunday morning found us astir at daybreak, and by five o'clock we were again on the tramp.

The map showed that Loch Avon lay due S.W., and the compass that the cairn of Coire Riabbach lay in that direct line, so we shaped accordingly, and reaching the top, found the morning air keen as a razor edge, so quickening our steps in sympathy we made a rapid descent of the opposite side of the hill. Here we struck the Ailnack which at this point takes a somewhat remarkable knuckle-shaped bend. Turning suddenly to the right, as if seeking an outlet from an apparent *cul-de-sac*, it turns again as swiftly to the left and escapes through a deep and precipitous gorge dividing the hill we had just descended from its neighbour, Geal Charn Beag. Onwards, for the next five or six miles, was over a series of rolling hills, mostly heather clad, with here and there patches of dry bog, and an occasional bit of storm-scalped ground in the more elevated and exposed parts. Deer were now visible in several directions, and not a few lordly stags were picked out from amongst the more numerous hinds.

Save in one direction we had not as yet had any extended views worthy of special mention, but that prospect was a noble one, upon which we had been able to gaze at will throughout the day; we refer to that grand sub-range of mountains of which Ben Avon and Beinn a' Bhuird are the loftiest and most notable. The day being bright and clear, every detail was visible; the peaks, culminating in rocky masses resembling great warts, stood out against an unclouded sky, and the long extended slopes with their thin silvery streaks glistening in the sunlight marked the corries down which the mountains were hurrying their tribute of waters to the Avon. Having earned a rest and a meal after six hours' tramp, we decided to halt at a sequestered spot by the side of a small burn whose banks displayed a wealth of vegetation

and variety of plant life that were a veritable feast to the eye and would have gladdened the heart of a botanist. The perfect stillness of the morning was broken only by the crystal brook skipping and dancing merrily at our feet over its rocky bed. Lunch over and pipes hard agoing, we resumed our journey, which now lay in a steadily upward direction towards Creag Mhor.

So far, we had not consciously deviated from our direct line of route, for the way was devoid of difficulties throughout. Of steep faces or awkward edges, such as occasion sudden calls upon physical energy, there had been none. The going had been everywhere tolerable, and nowhere so vile as is to be experienced—say in the Larig Ghru.

As we made a gradual and easy ascent of Creag Mhor the ground became more and more storm-swept, and lying all round were patches of detritus which, as we crushed it under foot, reminded us of the eternal process of disintegration going on around us, and of the fact that the mountains themselves are in process of wearing away and even of ultimate disappearance. Having reached the Creag, we scrambled to the top of its rocky cairn to view the magnificent scene now opened up. Behind us were the rolling hills which faced us at early morning, and in front, looking through the pass over which Creag Mhor stands like a sentinel watching guard, we gazed into the great cavity at the bottom of which Loch Avon lies, and over which the crags and precipices frown to right and left, with Ben Muich Dhui in the background closing in the view with its snow-faced slopes. Higher up, to the right, Cairngorm rears its lofty head, and to the left Beinn Mheadhoin and Cairn Etchachan, each concealing patches of snow in their sun-defying recesses and gullies. Nearer, and to our more immediate right, Ben Bynac presented to us its by no means inconsiderable bulk and a clear view of its remarkable clustered group of rocky pillars, fashioned after no architectural order save that of nature. Turning our eyes to things in our still more immediate surroundings, we discovered at our feet something of more than passing

interest. Upon the block of stone on which we stood were a number of "pot-holes," varying in diameter from a foot to a foot and a half, and in depth from three to four inches. They were entirely circular and even, as if bored out with the precision of a mechanical tool.

Having reached Loch Avon, we chose the south side of the loch by which to approach the Shelter Stone, and it was well for our safety that we had so decided, as we were presently to realise. As we neared the head of the loch we noticed, far above us and on the heights opposite, several persons bearing downwards towards the Stag Rocks from the direction of Cairngorm. L—, who had been plagued with an appetite larger than our stock of provisions warranted, hugged the belief that they were bound for the Shelter Stone, and the hope that they would have supplies and to spare. It was a mistaken idea and a vain hope, however, as closer inspection with the aid of the glasses shewed that they were but day trippers, for they had no knapsacks, and their antics presently proved them to be singularly wanting in common sense when they commenced to loosen huge boulders which, bringing others in their train, tore down the gullies, punctuating their meteoric career by puffs of "smoke" and dust, followed by crack, clatter, and boom which reminded us of Tyndall's descriptions of stone avalanches in his "Glaciers of the Alps." They resumed their "fun" later, on the edge of the Stag Rocks themselves, hurling huge boulders over the sheer precipices some hundreds of feet in height. We had thus reason to congratulate ourselves that we had not come by the other side of the loch, where we could not have been seen by those above, and where the boulders would have intersected our course, many of which actually found their billet in the loch.

Towards evening the weather began to shew less favourable signs, the wind rising and bringing with it fitful showers of stinging rain, whilst cloud masses, breaking on the heights, were quickly dispersed, and hurried leeward. Strong gusts of wind swept down from Ben Muich Dhui, lifting spindrift from the surface of the loch to such

astonishing height as can only be accounted for by the force of the wind rushing through such a narrow defile. We were thus driven early to our night quarters under the Shelter Stone, to emerge from them at dawn, for we had to reach Aberdeen, where there were trains to be caught ere the clock took another turn, and there was a long twenty miles or so between us and any mode of conveyance thither.

The Cairngorm Club