

A FORTNIGHT AMONG THE CAIRNGORMS.

BY WILLIAM C. WELSH.

On Saturday, 4th July 1907, my brother Douglas and I started from Aberdeen for our usual fortnight's outing on the Cairngorms. By nightfall we had encamped at the foot of Coire Etchachan, on an island formed by the burn flowing down the corrie. The night turned out a trifle misty.

Sunday was far too warm for tramping with packs, so we dawdled about. At ten o'clock we caught sight of some men making up the corrie, but they were too intent on their climb to pay attention to us. About one o'clock we took our cameras and held for a deep cutting in Beinn a' Chaorruinn, through which flows the Glas Allt. The cutting proved of great interest botanically, its sides being covered with many plants of different kinds. We spent some time here, and after climbing to the summit plateau we lay down and had a sun bath. Thence we descended into the Larig an Laoigh, near the Dubh Lochans, and so "home" over the shoulder of Beinn Mheadhoin. As we arrived in sight of our camp we descried three figures descending the corrie. At 7.30 p.m. we packed up, and made for Loch Etchachan. The night, however, was too delightful to be spent inside, so we had a scramble round the loch, and in our peregrinations came upon the remains of some planking with rings for mooring. This we took to be what was left of the boat and its accessories which had been destroyed by vandals a good few years ago. On the opposite side of the loch we found more wreckage. The crags were magnificent in the twilight, but the snow was not nearly so plentiful as we had seen it in former years. On the circuit we startled a pair of ptarmigan. When we returned to the tent we tried some photographs of the loch and crags and the crescent moon. In the background was Ben Muich Dhui, black and grey, snow-

clad in parts, while the loch itself was smooth and clear with the reflection of the crags and snow and moon. There was not a cloud in the sky.

At 4 a.m. on Monday voices were wafted to our ears, and when we looked out at the ventilator we saw two figures starting the climb of the Ben. The day turned out a broiling one, so after taking panoramic views of the loch we lay on the rug outside the tent and wrote. We happened to turn round and caught sight of some one making for Loch Avon. We called, and he waved his hand, continuing on his way. The sky now became overcast and the wind cool, so we seized our opportunity and trekked up the hill. At the Cairn we found information to the effect that that morning a gentleman from Elgin, accompanied by an Aviemore guide, had been on the summit. These were the two we had heard and seen at Loch Etchachan. The opposite side of the Larig Ghru was quite clear and distinct. Snow was not so plentiful as it usually is at this time. On Lochnagar we could see huge black rain clouds, and we inferred from their increasing bulk and deepening black that we were soon to receive part of the storm. With as much haste as possible we pitched our tent, selecting a spot a few yards from the Cairn. Just as we had gathered our paraphernalia under canvas and secured water from an adjacent snowfield, mist and rain came. After a meal we lay down and waited for night, as the rain fell and the mist thickened.

On Tuesday morning, mist and rain were still with us, so we remained another night here. How hard the bed was! Our bodies bore the marks of the unsympathetic and hard sand for many days. Wednesday morning brought nothing better. The mist was denser than ever, but luckily there was no rain. We therefore determined to strike camp and make for Cairngorm. In a short time we reached a snow-field which we started to cross, but to our astonishment we never seemed to get any nearer the end of it. We could not see beyond five yards or so, so thinking we had come on some of the Feith Buidhe snow-fields we turned to climb back. In turning we must

have made a mistake in the direction, for we climbed and climbed and still the snow stretched above us. At last, however, we reached the upper edge of the field, and skirting it we proceeded on our way, but soon realised that we were "lost." As Cairngorm was our objective we held on in a direction, now north, now north-east, and after a weary wander found ourselves at a cairn on the edge of a precipice. The mist in the corries made the overhanging crags appear huge and threatening. We came to the conclusion that we were probably on Cairn an Lochain, and so followed the head of the crags. Suddenly the mist lifted and revealed Speyside with Loch Morlich gleaming blue, its rim of golden sand making a pretty frame. On the other side we could faintly distinguish the Feith Buidhe and the Garbh Uisge snow-fields. So far so good; but soon all was blotted out. We stumbled on towards the top of Cairngorm till we landed on an outcrop of rock, when up went the mist again and we found ourselves overlooking the Garbh Allt and the outlet of Loch Avon! We retraced our steps, and once more entered the mist. Soon something loomed out in front of us; we had actually arrived at the Cairn! The biting wind, however, made us move on, and we did so towards the Avon. About the 3,700 feet level we camped by the side of a mossy burn. The mist had now lifted, and we spread our clothes out on the ground to dry. After surrounding the tent with clumps of moss to keep out any wind, we got under canvas and took our first meal for the day between 3 and 4 p.m., feeling much refreshed by it after our wanderings. The mist again enveloped us and rain poured in torrents, but we were cosily encamped. Every now and then we heard the call of ptarmigan.

Thursday brought little difference in the weather, so we took late breakfast and started for the Saddle. A scramble over the rocks led us down to the Garbh Allt, where we wandered for a time. We attempted panoramic views of the Loch from the Saddle. This done, we forded the outlet of the Loch to reach the Beinn Mheadhoin side, where we saw half a dozen seagulls. The results of the

winter's storms were everywhere—fresh debris from the crags sloping down to the water's edge, often in parallel lines. Three wild ducks came flying over the loch, and footprints of deer were numerous, and on the sands were a few names written by means of a stick. There were no signs of anyone near the Shelter Stone, but we came upon roots of juniper and fir, evidently brought there with the intention of being used for firewood; there was also a supply of heather for a mattress. On the Dairymaid's Field, the scene of last year's "At Home," plants of butterball and violets were in flower. The marsh marigold was still in bloom, while the saxifrage was blossoming like so many stars. The procumbent willow also carpeted the ground. Not far from us we saw a solitary wasp. On the climb back to Cairngorm fresh falls of rock were evident. Arrived at the top of the crags we reconnoitered some deep gullies where beech ferns were growing in profusion. We roused a flock of ptarmigan, probably those that had been calling the night before. Camp was soon sighted; the night was, if possible, more misty. We were very warm at first, but towards the small hours of Friday morning we were shivering.

At about half past two I happened to look out at the ventilator and found the sky clear and the valleys filled with mist, so we put on our shoes, and, taking cameras, made for the summit of Cairngorm. The air was bitterly cold and we could almost hear our blood pumping through our bodies.

When we arrived at the cairn, Speyside lay before us bathed in fleecy clouds of mist. The summits of the Cairngorms rose up from the mist, black and brown, with fields of snow glistening here and there. The sands round the coast could also be discerned, but faintly. But now without warning we were enveloped in a thick wall of mist, and as we were almost stupid with the cold, we made a rush for the tent, and, throwing ourselves down, we were soon sound asleep. At about 7.30 we made ready for breakfast. The wind was howling round us, the flaps of the tent being every now and then raised by its force. Packing our rucksacks, but leaving food and a few odds

and ends we did not require, we made a start for Aviemore. Almost as soon as we left, down came a thick driving wet mist. The wind increased in force till we could not hear each other speak. No time was wasted, for we were soaking, so we pegged on till we struck the Larig Ghru. After crossing the foot-bridge over the burn we were surprised to come upon a small tramway stretching through Rothiemurchus as far as we could see; it was used for conveying cut timber to a saw mill not far from Coylum Bridge. Following the tramway for some distance we struck off to the right and had a bath and a change of raiment. We were rather tired, so we decided to train from Aviemore to Boat of Garten, where we were to spend the week-end with friends from Aberdeen.

Saturday saw us at Loch Vaa, an exceedingly pretty spot. On the road home we found the marsh speedwell and the burnet saxifrage, two plants easily mistaken for others.

Sunday was dull and overcast, so we decided on a walk across the moor. By the road-side I found a pocket book with papers of considerable value, some £2000.

Monday saw us ordering bread, etc., which we packed in our rucksacks, after which a start was made for Loch Eunach. On the way we called on the owner of the pocket-book; it had never been missed! Crossing the river, we arrived at Coylum Bridge, and then paid a visit to Aviemore before finally starting for the hills. We had run out of photographic plates, but not one could be obtained in Aviemore, so we had to return empty-handed.

Our route lay up Glen Eunach, and by the time we arrived at the upper bothy mist and rain had begun to fall, so we hastily selected a spot for camping.

Tuesday turned out fine, so we decided to have a scramble round the loch. The mist as usual followed us, and we had two blinding showers of rain.

On Wednesday as we were packing for Cairngorm, Cameron, the watcher, came on the scene and shewed us a spot on the Sgoran Dubh crags where eagles had been nesting. We then trekked up Coire Dhonndail, while

Cameron made for the Coire Odhar path to repair it. When we arrived on the plateau we found that there was no snow in the vicinity of the Wells of Dee. Near the summit of Braeriach we saw a hare which had almost dispensed with its winter colouring. As the snow-field over the zigzag path to the Larig Ghru was too steep, we had perforce to scramble downhill anyhow. We took it very leisurely up Ben Muich Dhui, and on the plateau came upon a specimen of white moss campion (*Silene acaulis*.) At this point my right heel began to feel too painful for walking with the shoe on, so I went barefoot till we reached our previous camping ground on Cairngorm. We found it under water, so we chose a higher level, and soon had the tent up for the night.

We started on Thursday for Braemar for a supply of photographic plates. We raced down to the Saddle and plunged across the Avon into the Larig an Laoigh. We tore on through it at full speed to Derry Lodge, thence making for Braemar, where we deposited our exposed plates for safety. We accepted the offer of a bed in Braemar and started again for our camp on Friday.

Rain of course came with us, and by the time we had arrived at Derry Lodge we were thoroughly soaked. After we had entered Glen Derry, my heel again became painful, so I walked barefoot over a path ankle deep in water. The wind so drove the rain into our faces that we had to turn our backs to the blast every now and then in order to clear our eyes. Our first obstacle of any magnitude was the Glas Allt, which was a foaming torrent of yellowish-brown water. No stones were visible, so we had to cross by pitting our strength against the current. We got through safely, but soon mist and darkness came down, and the storm became so bad that we saw it would have been madness to proceed any further. We turned back to Derry Lodge, which was reached in due time. Robertson, the Corroul watcher, had just arrived, soaked like ourselves, so we hung our clothes in front of the bothy fire while we were togged in Duff tartan.

After a most comfortable night, we breakfasted and set

off once more for Cairngorm. The storm was still continuing, though not so fiercely as on the previous night, but by the time we were in the glen we had become soaked once more. We got over the Glas Allt, but then there was the Coire Etchachan water, a veritable waterfall from sky-line to valley. After a most exciting tussle we got safely across. It was now plain going to the Shelter Stone, but when we should have the Garbh Uisge Water facing us, what should we do? With difficulty I obtained a footing in the stream; with still greater difficulty I moved my legs. The water was swirling round my waist, and the current was causing the boulders to shift. My eyes were on the opposite bank, and with legs wide apart I slowly manœuvred across.

Douglas, however, thought he saw an easier spot, but had to give it up. He then selected the inlet to the loch, but found it about a dozen feet deep, on which he came back to the place where I had crossed. I tried to give him a few directions, but in the awful din it was impossible to make myself heard. As soon as he entered the water the current lifted him off his feet, landing him on the wrong bank. He tried again, and slowly moved towards me, but lost his balance, and was again swept off his feet. By this time I had re-entered the water to lend him a hand; by catching hold of my stick he in a manner righted himself, but in so doing hauled me into the centre, though between the two of us we at last got across. With benumbed limbs and sodden clothes we started to climb Cairngorm. The mist was so thick that we could not see the loch; however, after a desperate struggle we surmounted all obstacles and arrived at our tent. Our "home" was still standing in the midst of the storm, but in a pool of water. It was indeed fortunate that we had returned to Derry the night before, for all our belongings were running in water. Our intention had been to meet the Club at this time, but, as we learned afterwards, the excursion planned to take place that day had been abandoned, on account of the weather.

We were hungry, very hungry, and we had no matches,

but they would have been of little use to us. Our only food then for such an emergency was a drink of water and meal, with which we were much refreshed. With all haste we packed or rather rammed the clothes, etc., into our rucksacks, and set off for Inverey. Not wishing a repetition of the forenoon's experience, we struck across Cairngorm on to Ben Muich Dhui, landing on the track leading from the summit to Coire Etchachan. The rest was easy, and after plunging across the Etchachan Water half-way down the corrie, we entered Glen Derry. At 4.15 p.m. the rain stopped, and on arriving at Derry Lodge at 4.50 we found Fraser and Robertson enjoying a game of golf. They had had no rain since about 12 o'clock! After tea we set off for Inverey.

On Sunday we paid a visit to the Colonel's Bed and the vicinity, and on Monday we trekked to Braemar *en route* for Aberdeen. This was a fortnight full of episodes beneficial to our health and strength; a severe test also of our endurance. It was, I think, an ideal holiday; may we have many more such!