

HOLIDAY EXCURSIONS AMONG THE CAIRNGORMS.

BY JAMES STEWART.

A DESCRIPTION of the region of the Cairngorms in "Ben Muich Dhui and his Neighbours," and various articles in *The Cairngorm Club Journal* awakened in me a longing to visit the district. I wanted to climb the mountains, to wander through the glens, and to behold with mine own eyes

"The grizzly cliffs which guard
The infant rills of Highland Dee."

The first attempt to gratify this wish took the form of an all-night tramp with a friend, during a Saturday night and Sunday morning in August of 1907, from Blair Atholl to Aviemore, by the way of Glen Tilt, the Larig Ghru, and Rothiemurchus Forest. We left Blair Atholl at 7 p.m., and arrived at Aviemore between 9 and 10 next morning. On this occasion I got my first glimpse of the Golden Eagle in his native element; likewise my first view of Ben Muich Dhui as he glowered, dark and forbidding, out of his abode of cloud. I saw for the first time the tremendous gorge of the Larig; the mighty precipices of Braeriach; the cliffs of the Lurcher's Rock whose fang-like pinnacles appeared to rend the clouds; and the dark-green forest stretching for miles over the plain beneath. This variety of magnificent scenery, as viewed through the driving rain, made an impression on our minds that will not be readily effaced.

That excursion made me determined to spend a few days in the district as soon as an opportunity presented itself, and the first Saturday in July of last year found me established in a cottage close to Loch-an-Eilein. Sunday I spent in climbing Creag Dhu, and in lazing around the loch. Monday broke warm and bright, so, accompanied by all the winged insects in the forest, I

set off for Braeriach, *via* Glen Eunach. I intended to climb that mountain, descend into the Larig, and ascend Ben Muich Dhui, but a great deal of time was spent on Braeriach, exploring the mountain and admiring the magnificent panoramic view of the country which stretched on all sides to the far horizon. The idea of attempting to climb Ben Muich Dhui had to be abandoned for that day, and the Angel's Peak and Cairn Toul were successfully negotiated instead. The next morning I climbed Cadha Mhor, walked along the ridge to Sgoran Dubh, and descending into Glen Feshie arrived back at the cottage by way of Kinrara.

The last day of my visit came, and I had not so much as been even to the foot of Ben Muich Dhui, so I decided to make an attempt then. Near the entrance to the Larig rain began to fall heavily. At the large cairn, just before the track crosses the burn for the first time, I overtook two gentlemen and a boy with a bicycle laden with camping materials. The bicycle was being used as a means of transport, one of the men pulling it by means of a rope attached to the front forks, and the other pushing and guiding it by the handle-bar. They told me that it was their intention to go to Blair Atholl, and that they had been informed by a gamekeeper, whom they met in the forest, that there was a comparatively good path right through the pass; but at the time I came up with them they were beginning to be sceptical on this point. As they looked fatigued with their exertions, I offered to assist; and, shouldering their camping outfit, carried it along the narrow track, then over the screes at the Pools of Dee to a spot near the base of Cairn Toul where they proposed camping for the night. I afterwards heard that they arrived at Blair Atholl, without any further difficulty, three or four days later. By the time I left the party, the mist was lying thick on the hillsides, so I gave up all thought of attempting to make an ascent. The next day, while waiting at Aviemore station for

my train, I saw the whole group of mountains standing out bold and clear against the sky.

I again visited the district in the beginning of August, arriving on a Friday night. On the Saturday, accompanied by a young man from the house where I was staying, I set out with the intention of climbing Ben Muich Dhui. As on the previous occasions when I had been in the Larig, rain fell heavily, but we plodded onward almost to the Pools, deciding to climb by way of the March Burn. Whilst negotiating the last difficult part, we were assailed by a heavy blizzard of wind, hail, and sleet. There was absolutely no shelter, and as we were on the south side of the stream at a point where its banks were much too steep to attempt to crawl into the course of the burn, we had to lie as flat as possible against the rocks, and cling like leeches till the force of the gale abated. We then scrambled on to the top of the ridge, from which point it had been our intention to walk in a southerly direction to the summit of the mountain. As, however, the dense mist which overhung the Ben now began to settle down rapidly, there was nothing for it but to descend into the valley as speedily as possible. We found white heather in abundance and gathered a goodly bunch of it, the most of which has found its way to foreign climes, there to reawaken dreams of Scotia's heather hills in the breasts of several of her exiled sons and daughters. Wild fruits, such as blaeberrries, crowberries, and cranberries, were also growing in profusion.

Saturday, 10th October, found me, accompanied by a friend, paying another flying visit to Rothiemurchus. Sunday morning saw us directing our steps towards the hills. The day was exceedingly warm, and the tramp through the rugged defile of the Larig was suggestive of a trek over a desert. Going right over the *col* almost to where the burn that comes down the mountain joins the water from the Pools, we climbed to the cairn that surmounts the broad, flat summit of Ben Muich Dhui. The extent of the view was certainly limited, for though

the mountain itself was clear, the clouds hung fold upon fold on the surrounding heights ; but the air of mystery thus imparted was, in a measure, recompense for the lack of a distant view of the country. A stay of about ten minutes' duration was made on the summit, after which we commenced our downward journey as the clouds shewed a disposition to settle on our mountain top. When we had descended about half-way, the clouds suddenly lifted from the summits on the western side of the Larig, disclosing a magnificent view of the great corrie of Braeriach with its stupendous cliffs over which the burn tumbles, looking like a silver thread against the dark rocks. The pointed summit of the Angel's Peak, and cone-shaped Cairn Toul with Lochan Uaine sparkling like a gem in its bosom, completed a picture of mountain scenery which could scarcely be surpassed. A rapid descent brought us to the Pools, and by-and-by the mist came down and enveloped us in its chill, grey folds, as we trudged homewards. Darkness fell rapidly, and when the blackness of the night was aided by the sombre forest it was a trying task to keep to the foot-track, and we were glad indeed when the cairn at the finger-post was reached. Once on the driving road our difficulties vanished, the clouds were dispelled, and the moon shone forth bright and clear. The forest took on a strange, soft beauty ; the air was cool, and fragrant with the odour of pine and juniper ; an intense silence, broken only by the music of the rippling burns, the hoot of an owl, or the bellow of some distant stag, pervaded the land. The remainder of the journey was negotiated in fine style, but we slackened our pace the better to admire the beauties of Loch-an-Eilein, which rippled and danced in the moonlight.