

LOST IN THE MIST ON THE CAIRNGORMS.

(A MID-VICTORIAN EXPERIENCE).

BY GEORGE G. CAMERON.

In the *Journal* for January last the article on Glen Tilt recalls personal experiences of a date much nearer our own day than the forties of last century. The present writer had his day in Glen Tilt when he had to wade the Tarff, but was spared an encounter with the Duke of Atholl. Some years after, a young friend from Glasgow arrived in Aberdeen on a cycling tour. This was in the early days of cycling, before the safety machine saw the light. My friend was over 6 feet in height, and when mounted on the huge bicycle then in use, he attracted the attention of the people wherever he appeared. His programme included a ride up the valley of the Dee to Braemar, and thence through Glen Tilt to Blair Atholl. He carried his cycle over Glen Tilt, and waded the Tarff with the clumsy machine on his back. Since the date of that exploit, I have not felt disposed to say much about having crossed Glen Tilt.

Of late years, the situation for mountaineers has changed considerably for the better. The young members of the Cairngorm Club scarcely know the state of things 30 or 40 years ago. The following paper records the experiences of an early member of the Cairngorm Club, years before the Club was heard of.

Over thirty years ago, on a summer afternoon, the writer, with a brother tourist, arrived at Lynwilg Inn. Their purpose was to climb to the summit of Cairngorm and Ben Muich Dhui next day, and descend in time to catch the Strathspey train in the afternoon, from Boat of Garten to Aberdeen. The evening passed pleasantly in the company of a member of the Mazawattee Tea Company, who opened our eyes as to the immense sums spent by large public companies in advertising. I have

never seen a Mazawattee advertisement since without associating it with that night in the Lynwilg Inn.

As we had a long day's journey, we were on foot soon after one o'clock a.m. In certain states of the river it seems that the Spey may be forded at a point almost opposite the Inn. But as neither of us was a good swimmer, we followed the turnpike to the bridge near Aviemore, though the journey would have been considerably shortened by fording the river and making our way straight through the Rothiemurchus Forest. Avoiding the perplexities of the forest, we kept the road to Coylum Bridge, and made our way up stream to the Bennie Bridge, and crossed for the Larig Pass. For a short distance we followed the Larig path, then turned off to the left, passed under the Castle Hill, carefully looking for Cairngorm stones, and gradually pushed up the side of Cairngorm, and reached the summit between seven and eight o'clock. The day was before us and we did not hurry, but while we were climbing Cairngorm a mist began to show itself here and there on the hills—not to any great extent at first, and we flattered ourselves that it would clear off as the day advanced. We sat down to breakfast on the top of Cairngorm in the best of spirits, believing that we should accomplish our purpose and have an ideal day on the Cairngorms. Before breakfast was over we had too good reason to change our opinion. The mist was gradually settling down over the tops of the mountains, and we resolved to make for the top of Ben Muich Dhui as fast as our feet—already somewhat tired—could carry us. We got to the top of the Ben, but we never reached the cairn. The mist was quite thick, and we wandered to and fro for an hour. We knew that we were on the summit; there was no more climbing, whichever direction we took. Sometimes we found ourselves on the edge of the precipitous side of the mountain, looking down on the Pools of Dee. Turning rapidly in an opposite direction, we found ourselves by and bye descending, probably in the direction of Loch Etchachan, though of that we could not be certain. The only thing

we were sure about was that we were on the top of the Ben, and that we had not reached the cairn. An hour seemed quite enough for this sort of work; we had tired ourselves to no purpose. The cairn would not surrender.

Our business now was to get down to the valley in time to secure our train to Aberdeen. Yes—to get down; but how? Time was rapidly passing; the mist was still thick all around us. We had no food beyond a few biscuits, as we counted on our breakfast to supply the necessary strength to bring us down to the valley, when we could dine before leaving for Aberdeen. If the mist did not lift we might have to spend the night on the mountain side, and the outlook was becoming serious. We sat down to consider the situation. As we were cooling down and collecting our thoughts the mist lifted, so that we could see about 100 yards ahead. I at once took out my compass and set our route for the north-west, with the view of reaching the Larig path. We set off hopefully, but the mist came down thicker than before, and for an hour we trudged on in darkness. At the end of that time we found ourselves on the southern shoulder of Cairngorm, looking down on the Shelter Stone, and the south-west end of Loch Avon. Talk about being lost in a fog! I had often used the expression, but neither of us dreamed of what it meant till we sat and looked helplessly at each other above Loch Avon, when we thought we must be about the Larig path, close to the Rothiemurchus forest. We took our bearings, settled our route by compass, and started again for the Larig path, before the mist came down. Soon we were in darkness, and spent another hour in steady walking, hoping, as if against hope, to strike the path that was to lead us to rest. After another weary hour the mist lifted, and to our horror and disgust, we found that instead of going almost due west, as we intended to do, we had gone north-east, crossed the summit of Cairngorm, and were on the N.E. shoulder of the hill, looking down on the opposite end of Loch Avon from that which met our astonished gaze an hour before. It seemed incredible, but the fact could not be disputed.

Truly we were lost in a fog! And we learned that in such a case it is no use to consult the compass at the start of a tramp, and then put it in one's pocket. The only safe course is to keep it in one's hand, and take every step under its guidance.

We sat down and considered what we should do. The matter was becoming serious. Fortunately, the mist lifted more widely than it had done previously. We saw fairly distinctly for a considerable distance the district across which lay the way to our path. Without the loss of a moment we made off, resolved to get over as much ground as possible before the mist came down again. But from this time the mist was compassionate and generous; we had no more trouble with it. After a race of a mile or so we saw a man on our right, still at a considerable distance, but obviously doing his best to cut across our track. It was not difficult to guess who he was, or what was the object of his race across the hill to intercept us. The lessee of the Forest, an English Lord, was a game-preservee of the extreme kind. But for this, we would have varied our day's programme and descended by Loch Morlich. But it was far from our purpose to give any ground of offence, and we resolved to return by the way by which we ascended.

The margin of time was getting very narrow, if we were to save our train, and we were reluctant to lose even a yard by slowing our pace. But we could not fairly ignore the keeper's signals, and after a while we stopped. When he came up, we wished him good-day, and when he recovered his breath, he asked us what we were doing there, and where we were going. We replied that we were there against our will—that we wished to get off the hill and down to the Larig path,—that the mist had completely bamboozled us,—and that we were doing our best to gain the path from which we had helplessly wandered. This keeper was quite gentlemanly and reasonable. He informed us that his Lordship was out stalking in the direction in which we were going, that if we went on we might spoil his sport, and thus create ill-feeling; and he suggested that we should re-

trace our steps so far, and descend by the path leading by Loch Morlich. We replied that we had purposely avoided that path from regard to his Lordship, that if we returned to it, we should certainly lose our train to Aberdeen; but that rather than risk the spoiling of his Lordship's sport we would act on his suggestion. If the keeper had not been so polite, we might have turned a deaf ear to his proposal, and, even at the risk of encountering his Lordship in the face, might have hurried on our way in the hope of still securing our train.

If we had done so, or if we had run directly in his Lordship's way, we were assured, on reaching our quarters at night, that it would not have been surprising if he had fired at us. Reports of this kind reached us from time to time, but we were not disposed to attach much value to them. When a lessee—a wealthy man from another quarter—interferes in any way with what the people regard as their liberties—though, it may be, not their rights—he is apt to be characterised in terms somewhat unreasonable, if not unfair. In any case we avoided all this side of the question by bidding good-bye to the keeper in a friendly way, and turning our faces towards the path to Loch Morlich. Our train was lost, and we made up our minds to a night on Speyside. We had gone only about half-a-mile, when, out from behind a knoll, suddenly marched another keeper. What his exact position was among the officials of the Lodge, we had no means of determining. He was as overbearing as the other keeper had been considerate and polite. "Where are you going?" he asked, in a tone intended obviously to alarm us. "We are going, against our will, to the path from Cairngorm by Loch Morlich. A little bit back on the hill a keeper told us that his Lordship was out stalking in the direction in which we were going, and he requested us politely to turn back and descend by Loch Morlich. Though it means the loss of our train to Aberdeen, we have done so rather than run the risk of interfering with his Lordship's sport." "You should not be on the hill." "Eh, do you mean to say that we have no right to be on the hill?" "No, I don't

say that; but this is not the right of way." "Of course not; we are here at the request of the keeper we have just left; and if we were not on the legal path when we encountered him, the fault was that of the mist. Perhaps you and your English master ignore Providence, and make no allowance for the mist." "If you wish to go on the hill you should apply to his Lordship, who would furnish you with a guide to take you up and down safely." This fairly roused us, and I turned on him and said, "You are a Scotsman, and you condescend to tell a countryman that he should go on his knees and beg a wealthy English Lord, who has leased our forests for sport, to permit him to go on the hills on which his fathers roamed as free as the air they breathed! Are you not ashamed of yourself?" "Well, I am disposed to agree with you," was the reply, and our trouble was at an end.

When we reached the Loch Morlich path we sat down to rest. Our difficulties were past, and though we were tired and hungry, we had a good road before us, and the end of the journey was in view. We had not sat long when another keeper arrived on the scene, accompanied by an English gentleman and a young lad, scarcely more than a boy. The keeper made some gruff remark as to how we were there. I asked him if he had anything to do with us, and he replied that he had been sent to take us off the hill. On this I turned to my companion and said, "This is becoming intolerable; take out your notebook and write down what this man says." Then turning to the keeper I continued, "You say you were sent to take us off the hill. Who sent you?" "My master, of course." "Who is your master?" "Lord ———." "Well, we have just left two keepers, at different places on the hill, who assured us that his Lordship had been for some time out stalking far from the Lodge." "Oh, it wasn't Lord ——— who sent me, but the head man at the Lodge." "That is contradiction number one," I said to my friend, "have you got it down?" "Yes." Then I proceeded, "You say you were sent to take us off the hill. How did you know we were on the hill? Till a short

time ago, it was impossible for anyone to see us on the hill." The reply was that we had been seen on a spur of the hill, which was quite possibly the N.E. summit on which we sat disconsolate, looking down on the end of Loch Avon which we did not wish to see. The fact was that there were keepers at the Lodge whose business it was to discover, through the help of their field-glasses, any persons climbing the hill. When the mist lifted all around, *we* had been discovered on the shoulder of Cairngorm, and the *English gentleman* making his way around by the Castle Hill to the summit. When we started across country two keepers were sent after us to bring us down by Loch Morlich; and another was sent post-haste to the top of Cairngorm to bring the other party down by the same path. Poor keepers! Two were sent after us, and they had to hurry across the country lest we should escape them. The man sent up to intercept the Englishman had to reach the top of Cairngorm before he could leave it. The keeper had to go at express-train rate, and it was no wonder that he was not in the best of tempers when he reached us, resting quietly by the side of the path.

The Englishman greatly enjoyed our catechising of the keeper. And when, apparently, we had done, he quietly interposed in this way: "Well, this is exceedingly interesting to me. I went up with my young friend by the Larig route. We wished very much to descend by Loch Morlich; but as we were strangers, and the lessee was reported to be very sensitive as to his rights, we made up our minds to descend by the same route as we had taken in ascending. But while we were on the top this man came up and offered himself as guide by the very route we wished to take. It is rather amusing, but very satisfactory to us." Between the two parties the keeper was in a funk, and we had a good deal of sympathy with him. In those days, the keepers were, in many respects, to be condoled with, rather than blamed. And, if a man had a bit of a character, he could scarcely be blamed for being somewhat crusty, after such a race to the top of Cairngorm, and such a welcome when he descended with

his capture. When we started, he went with us and kept us company to Loch Morlich. At the Lodge gate he came up to me and said that it was customary for travellers who passed that way to leave their cards. I replied that when we were in that quarter and wished to call on his Lordship we would hand in our cards. And so we left him, and hurried on to Boat of Garten where we spent the night.

We were sorry for the keepers; it is no use to blame them. Of course there are keepers and keepers. The first one we encountered was as gentlemanly as we could wish, and we at once yielded to his proposal. The second was bumptious and we treated him accordingly. The third was obviously indignant on account of his day's experiences with *these horrid mountaineers*. But all three were simply obeying orders; moreover, the lessee paid a heavy rent for the Forest, and expected that his shooting and stalking would not be interfered with. The proprietor should have let the Forest on the distinct condition that the public should have the unrestricted use of the rights of way involved. If it were clearly understood by the public that this was done, there should be no trouble. Mountaineers would keep to the right of way (unless a mist turned them topsy-turvy, and *then* there must be give and take). Keepers would discharge their duties, faithful to their employers, and in accordance with the laws of the country. Lessees would respect the rights of the people, and would find, in return, that their interests as lessees were scrupulously observed. It is gratifying to believe that we are coming nearer and nearer to such a condition of things.