

THE CALL OF THE WILD.

BY HUGH D. WELSH.

THE Call of the Wild! How does one know it, and how does one answer it? Many have heard it, and many have answered it—but who can tell what are the sensations aroused and what it means when responded to? I am not capable of defining this “lure of little voices,” but shall endeavour to relate—in a quite inadequate way, I am afraid—what rewards may be gained in answering their insistent call. In the desolate, mist-draped corries of the Cairngorms I seem to find a solution, and several delightful pilgrimages spent in the region have yielded some of the rewards indicated. This article is an endeavour to set out the results of one of these pilgrimages, which was undertaken with two friends.

The forenoon of a sultry Saturday one summer found us setting out of Braemar, laden with a small sleeping-tent and all the necessary paraphernalia of a camping holiday packed away in roomy rucsacks. Ignoring the remarks and stares of sundry spectators, we swung along the hard, sun-flecked road to the Linn of Dee. As the road wound in and out and the view expanded, memories awoke with each familiar object brought into sight. Corriemulzie, with its deep, cool, verdant ravine, called for a lengthy visit and a prolonged examination of its floral treasures. Friendships were renewed in Inverey, and the Linn of Dee roared a welcome. Shadows were now silently slipping through the trees, and heavy leaden-coloured clouds settled down on the ridges and dropped groping fingers of mist into the valleys. Still we wandered on; the air became cooler, and rain began to curtain off the hills. At ten o'clock, about a mile from the White Bridge, the rain increased, and in a short time we were under the welcome shelter

of our little tent. A hot meal was soon prepared and disposed of, and we settled down for the night. All night long the rain rattled on the canvas, and little sleep was got. Out of the darkness came whisperings and murmurings blending with the eerie hurrying of the river and the rustling of the wind.

Morning showed us the scudding clouds trailing filmy streamers along the slopes, while here and there a splash of gold promised a brilliant day. In due course we were on our way again, and a short cut through the jewel-strewn heather brought us to the rushing Chest of Dee, breaking in greeny-white sheets over the ledges. Ample scope was afforded here for botanical search, and many were the plants noted. A mile or so above the Chest we pitched our tent, and in the blazing sunshine we made an ascent of Sgor Mor. Two adders were captured, and botanical finds of some interest lightened the climb. The view from the summit was beyond our expectations. The crags at the head of Glen Luibeg showed magnificently, while Carn a Mhaim, Cairn Toul, and the Devil's Point were sights in themselves. Near the summit of Sgor Mor is a large flat boulder with two good specimens of "pot-holes" such as one sees at the Linn of Dee. In descending to our tent we were rewarded by the sight of several rain showers passing across some of the southern hills, each one emblazoned with a gorgeous rainbow. Exploration of the river bed showed us numerous areas of richly-coloured moss beds—treasures so seldom seen. After a wet, misty night, the following day was one of good promise, so a visit to Ben Muich Dhui with a night or two at the Shelter Stone was planned.

At midday, giving a final look to the security of the tent with the baggage inside, we set off with a few necessities up Sgor Mor and across the west shoulder of Sgor Dubh. Near the summit ridge we lay down to watch the passage to the valley beneath of a herd of a hundred deer, most of them antlered. In batches of twenty or so they filed away, watched over by a scout

perched on the skyline. Luibeg and Derry Lodge were visited, and acquaintance with the residents renewed.

Glen Derry was traversed at a steady pace, a second or two here and there permitting us to gather what botanical treats we could see. The stillness was broken now and again by the plaintive cry of the curlew. At the last of the trees standing white and ghostlike, we discarded our rucsacks and each of us gathered a big bundle of dry branches. Loading up again we plodded on, and in the gathering darkness forded the Etchachan burn. The grind up Coire Etchachan was accomplished with many a sigh, and emerging upon the shore of the Loch, we were met by a stiff breeze and a shower of spray. Scudding clouds were low overhead, shutting out what light there was. Darkness was now upon us, accompanied by a slight rain. We picked our way across the plateau to the crest above Loch Avon, which glimmered dully far below. The voices of the torrents rushing down the rock wall at the head of the corrie rose and fell about us, urging us onward to shelter. Mist came surging past, and it was with some difficulty that we descended the precipitous path* and wound our way to the Shelter Stone. No one was in possession, but

*As I have occasionally encountered doubts as to there really being a path from the ridge overlooking Loch Avon down to the Shelter Stone, I may assure my readers that such a path can be found and can be easily remembered—once it is found. In my early visits to the Shelter Stone—where I have several times stayed a fortnight on end—I had ample opportunities of thoroughly examining the corrie and the ridges, and it was then that I came across the path that I refer to. At its upper end it is well defined, but as it slants across the gravel and the stony slope it becomes indefinite. In one place it cuts across a loose sandy slope where the descent of stones has cleared a passage. Just above this cut there used to be—and perhaps there is still—a large boulder which appeared ready to slide down at any moment. Many is the time that I have crossed the cut with my heart in my mouth! The path then slants down the ridge of a long moraine, and, winding in and out among the moraines at the foot of the screes, it crosses the boggy ground at the “watering-place” for the Shelter Stone, where it seems to disappear. A few feet farther on is the path leading to the Stone. I may add, however, that few of the many visitors to the Shelter Stone seem to know of the existence of this path, which saves much fatigue and many a hard knock.

the latest occupants had left the "bedroom" in a deplorable state. We soon put it to rights, however, and, seated round the welcome warmth of a brightly-burning fire under the overhang of the "kitchen" outside, we discussed a warm meal and our day's tramp. Throughout the night the swish and drip of the rain blended with the continuous soothing rush of the torrents. The volume of the sound was so constantly altering with the gusts of wind that we imagined we heard talking, laughing, singing, and bands playing.

After a most comfortable night we emerged from under the Shelter Stone into heavy rain and driving mist. Our departure was put off, and we made ourselves comfortable round a fire in the "kitchen" and settled down for the day. The time between meals was occupied in reading "Scrambles Amongst the Alps," identifying our botanical finds with the aid of a "Hayward," and enjoying the play of mist and rain on the surrounding slopes. Night came and went, and next morning was little better than the preceding.

We were soon ready for the day's tramp, however, and set off. On the way down to the Dairymaid's Field we examined a small wasps' "bike" fastened under a ledge of rock. This bike was found to contain at least eight wasps, though there may have been more. The Feith Buidhe was plunged through, and we made a slant up the loose scree on the slope of Cairngorm beneath the Stag's Rock, reaching the ridge close on the headwaters of the Coire Raibeirt burn. Through the breaks in the driving mist we got glorious peeps at Loch Etchachan and the crags above, and, away down, at the "white horses" scudding over Loch Avon, at the bottom of its huge ditch. Not a sound was heard but the whistling of the wind against the gravel and coarse herbage. By the time the summit of Cairngorm was reached we could hardly stand against the force of the gale. In the lee side of the cairn, however, it was all right, but bitterly cold. A search by compass in the mist for almost half-an-hour, for the Marquis's Well,

failed to find it. To Ben Muich Dhui was our next move, but it was with great difficulty that we progressed, so strong was the wind. Suddenly the mist broke away in front, and before us was the cliff wall of Coire an t Sneachda, with the little loch black and ugly under the scree. Up again we scrambled and a bee line was made for Lochan Buidhe. At one of the headwaters of Coire Domhatn pangs of hunger assailed us, and, making a ring of rucsacks, stones, and gravel, we set the spirit lamp going, and voted for mealy puddings—of all things! We explored around meantime and tried to get a little warmth; but the rain increased, and we decided that “mealy jims” half-cooked were better than rheumatism or worse. Loading up again, we set off munching the “mealies,” and, leaving the summit of the Ben for another time, made tracks for the March Burn, alongside which we descended into Glen Dee. About half-way down we dropped out of the mist, but not the rain, though we had the pleasure—somewhat annoying in the circumstances—of seeing Rothiemurchus bathed in glorious sunlight. The red and green bands of screes in the Larig Pass made a magnificent setting for so fine a sight, and we decided that the spectacle was sufficient reward for all the mist, cold, and rain that we had experienced. No view was obtained down Glen Dee, and the Garbh Coire was overflowing with rain and vapour.

The Pools of Dee were duly reached, and once on the track we hastened on. By this time it was late evening and the light was failing. On and on we splashed in the rain and rapidly gathering darkness. The Corrour Bothy watched us with a yellow eye as we passed, but arriving at last in pitch darkness at our sodden tent, we soon changed into dry things and settled down for the night.

Next day was filled with sunshine, and we got our things dried, and shifted camp to about half way up Allt a' Coire Mhoir, which descends from Ben Muich Dhui. Rain fell throughout the night, and next day

was thick with mist and rain. The cairn on Ben Muich Dhui was reached in a shower of hail, and we visited the site of a previous camp a few yards from the summit, where we had spent three soaking nights on the hard gravel some years before. The track to Loch Etchachan was followed, and we had a magnificent peep into Coire an Sput Dearg. Loch Etchachan was smothered in mist, and the corrie filled with lashing rain. Glen Derry was drier, and after crossing the swollen Glas Allt, we got out of the rain, and by the time Derry Lodge was reached were almost dry. Moonwort ferns and *Habenaria viridis* were gathered where the Allt a' Mhadaidh crosses the Lui road, and soon we were entering Inverey—again in rain.

A week-end was spent here in continual rain, and on Monday afternoon, in fine weather, we set off for Loch Callater, walking through Braemar. Corriemulzie was in spate and was a sight worth coming miles to see. The way to Loch Callater was new to us, and we were greatly interested in the numberless moraines round which the road winds. Sheep fed on all sides, and the air was filled with their pleasant odour. Camp was pitched at the loch edge near the Priest's Well, and before settling for the night, a circuit of the loch was made in the light of a crescent moon over Creag nan Gabhar. The loch rippled in brilliant sunshine next morning, and we determined to ascend Lochnagar. Creag an Loch and Carn an t Sagairt were taken on the way, and in doing so we obtained a perfect view of the Breakneck Fall and "lonely, lonely, dark Loch Candor." As Carn an t Sagairt was mounted we could see the Cairngorms, dark and grim under a huge rain-cloud which broke as we watched. Soon everything was blotted out except, for a minute or two, the wet slabs of the Glen Geusachan face of the Devil's Point, which glittered like a will o' the wisp through the darkness. Never shall we forget that sight. The plateau of Lochnagar was eventually reached, but a satisfactory view was out of the question. We were by

this time soaked through, but we determined to proceed. A glimpse was obtained away down into Coire Lochan an Eoin with its circular loch, and Lochan na Feadaige and Lochan an Tarmachan. The summit was reached, but of "the steep frowning glories" we saw nothing, though we prowled round the lip of the cliff in the mist and rain. Back we tramped to the tent and into a dry change, and had a hot meal. Next day was sunny and oppressively warm, and we got everything semi-dried. In the afternoon tracks were made for Braemar and home to Aberdeen.

In more ways than one our little trip was profitable. Although we have gone over the same ground again and again, there is a something that calls us back, and we are always ready to answer that call, even though the way is long and "the elements war."