

AN OCTOBER WEEK-END.

BY HUGH D. WELSH.

Thou, who hast given me eyes to see
And love this sight so fair,
Give me a heart to find out Thee
And read Thee everywhere.

LATE one October I had an early morning call from a friend in Aberdeen, who asked if I could manage to arrange a week-end to take him through the Láirig Dhrù to Aviemore. He had spent a short time in the Aviemore district, but whenever he had attempted to negotiate the Láirig, mist had come down, and he had usually found himself in Glen Eunach or on the slopes of Carn Elrick. He suggested the next week-end for our trip, and matters were arranged accordingly. That evening a note was sent off to Derry Lodge, to the late Donald Fraser, whom I knew well, asking if he could put us up there on Saturday night, and saying that if we received no word from him we would assume that it was all right.

Saturday morning came, and no reply. Nevertheless, with light hearts and heavy rucksacks, we steamed out of Aberdeen station on the 10.10 a.m. train. The day was typical of October, dull, with mist low down on the hills, and a heavy dampness all around. By the time Ballater was reached, however, the sun had come out strongly, and everything was looking fresh and beautiful. The motor run to Braemar was delightful, and though so late in the year, the air was pleasantly warm. The trees all around were gorgeous in their autumn colouring, and presented a wonderful picture against the dark background of firs and distant hills. Lochnagar stood up free from snow, clear and sharp against a brilliant sky, and seemed such a short distance away.

We reached Braemar in due course, made a few purchases, and began an entrancing tramp along the firm, ringing road en route for Derry Lodge. Never shall we forget that tramp. The birches were clad in russet and gold, sprinkling the roadway and heather with colour. Right and left stretched a canopy of golden brown, supported by swaying columns of black and silver. Rabbits scurried here and there, and robins piped from the dykes and fences. Away down on our right the river ran by whispering and rustling as it sparkled in the sunlight, and, beyond, Beinn a Bhuid was loosely girdled with a fast disappearing band of mist. Here and there through openings between the swaying yellow larch sprays vistas of the river valley presented themselves. Darkly-clothed hills dipped down into billows of green, brown and gold, splashing the slopes with patches of colour. Wisps of blue smoke twisted here and there, denoting human habitation. The Linn of Dee thudded and rumbled through the rapidly gathering darkness, and we lingered a few minutes to enjoy the effect of the afterglow reflected on the rapids.

To shorten our tramp, we decided to cut through the wood between the Linn and the Black Bridge in Glen Lui, and as I was acquainted with the route, the responsibility of a safe journey through rested with me. Little difficulty was experienced in finding an opening in the fence, but once on the other side it was not so easy to keep to the path. However, with the exception of tripping over a few protruding roots, and rousing several deer, we emerged on the other side of the wood without going astray. Comparatively open ground lay between us and the Black Bridge, and this was easily negotiated. I had often been in the glen at night, but I do not think it had ever appeared so eerie and mysterious as it did now. Borne by the wind were the hoarse bellows of the stags as they called to one another on the hillsides. A rustle and a clatter near by betrayed the presence of a hind as she scuttled off, and

now and again came the plaintive piping of a sand-piper haunting the river-bed. Westward Carn a' Mhaim was sharply outlined against a brilliant star-studded sky, and farther to the right soared the cone of Derry Cairngorm. All around, clear-cut ridges shut us in.

Trees closed round again as we groped our way to Derry Lodge. Our knock was answered by Donald Fraser himself, who was more than surprised to see us. Our letter had not arrived and would not be received till Monday! However, we were welcomed in and made quite at home. Ever will we recollect that evening. Seated before the roaring fire, we exchanged the latest news and "swapped yarns," and it was well on to "the wee sma' oors" before we retired to rest.

At eight o'clock, after a good breakfast, and good wishes for a perfect day, we set off. Mist was low down on the hill-tops, and the air had an invigorating sting. How good it was to be alive, and how good once more to feel the spring of the grass and heather underfoot, and to be able to appreciate the sights and sounds of "the loneliness of the hills"! Rapid progress was made, and soon we were over The Sands and across the foot-bridge spanning the Luibeg. Up the glen Ben Muich Dhui was buried in cloud, but Carn a' Mhaim was uncovering. The only sign of animal life so far was a flock of fieldfares we disturbed and scattered just beyond the bridge. Gradually the ugly face of the Devil's Point lifted above the skyline, capped by a heavy cloud which broke into mist and eddied down into Glen Geusachan. Nine o'clock found us trudging over the debris of the cloudburst of 1895, which broke off a portion of the Devil's Point and Carn a' Mhaim. Glen Dee was most uninviting. Nothing was to be seen but the lower slopes of the surrounding mountains, dull and sodden. The track was practically a burn in places, but that counted as nothing. Mist surged out of the Garachory, bringing with it the faint bellows of stags near the entrance. Several fine specimens could be seen on the lower slopes of Braeriach, head outstretched and

antlers laid along their sides, sending out their hoarse roar.

The track was becoming more broken, and we therefore descended and followed up the river-bed. At 11.30 a.m., we halted at the foot of the bank of boulders from under which the Dee gushes forth. Proceeding onwards, we examined and sampled the three Pools of Dee within their setting of boulders and brilliant mosses. Breaking the impressive stillness was the soft swish of the March Burn leaping down from Ben Muich Dhui, burying itself in the chaos of boulders forming the floor of this part of the Làirig. On either side rose steeply the slopes of Ben Muich Dhui and Braeriach, disappearing in jagged pinnacles and crags into wreathing, curling mist. Repairing several of the "stone men" in this wilderness of granite blocks occupied some of our time, and in due course we topped the "water-shed" and looked away down upon Rothiemurchus bathed in sunlight, splashed here and there with brilliant autumn foliage. At the ford at Allt na Làirig a halt was called about 12.30, and a hot meal prepared. Soon after one o'clock we once more set off towards human habitation.

Already we experienced a change in temperature, and as we lowered our elevation the atmosphere became warmer and more oppressive on our entering the forest. The Allt na Làirig Dhrù, hidden at the bottom of its deep ravine, was marked by a brilliant edging of birch and rowan, with an alder here and there. The colourings were all the more noticeable against the surrounding velvety green of the firs and the deep brown of the heather. Deer were more numerous, and from every side came their hoarse call.

Rapidly following up the long and well-defined track threading its way through the forest we passed Alltdruie bothy, and crossed the then rotten wooden bridge spanning the Allt na Beinne Moire. Under the glorious autumn conditions we thought that a visit to Loch an Eilein would be worth the trouble. Accordingly, we followed up a cart track almost due west from the Beinne

Moire bridge, and, shortly before three, suddenly emerged through the trees upon the east bank of the loch. Without a word we sank down upon the heather, and gave ourselves up to a thorough enjoyment of the picture before us. Ord Bain, on the north-western shore, was ugly and scarred with outcrops of rock and fallen blackened trees. Round the loch shore the woods gathered close, mirroring their beautiful tints in the unruffled water. The gamekeeper's house, covered with brilliant creepers, peeped above the tree-tops, and added to the beauty by sending lazily aloft a spiral of blue smoke that hung above in a slight haze. The islet bearing the ruins of the castle floated on a bed of colour, the naked guardian-like trees outlined against the tinted woods beyond. The level rays of the setting sun glorified the whole scene. Lost in its contemplation for some time, we at last bestirred ourselves, and continuing our way through a fairyland of colour along paths strewn thick with shedded glories, arrived at Aviemore about four o'clock.

Here we did justice to a good meal, and got into conversation with a gentleman, who could hardly believe we had come through the Làirig. All day, he said, the Làirig had been black with mist, and the surrounding mountains swept with rain. Viewed from Aviemore, the Làirig certainly looked terribly grim and dark, but, nevertheless, our journey had been a most enjoyable one; performed as it was without a drop of rain.

Wishing to return to Aberdeen next morning with as early a train as possible, we decided to go on to Boat of Garten. The railway line was shorter than the road, so we climbed a fence and set off along the middle of the track. By this time it was pitch dark, but though the sleepers and ballast proved a vexation, fair progress was made, and at seven o'clock we scrambled over the signal wires just outside Boat of Garten station, and made for the neighbouring houses. I had at one time spent a night or two at one of the houses with some friends, and accordingly we thought we might be able

to get a bed there. Negotiations were conducted through a closed window, but the lady of the house either did not recognise me, or, more probably, took us to be tramps. We tried the police station, but despite the fact that a window was brilliantly illuminated, our efforts at knocking were of no avail. As a last resort, we approached the hotel, and rang the bell. After a time bolts were shot, and a maid appeared. On our informing her what we wanted, she retired to the back premises — after closing the door and leaving us standing outside. However, the manageress came and ushered us in. We were the only visitors in the hotel, but were made most comfortable in every way.

The train we had proposed to travel by left about 5.30 a.m., but the hotel people would not guarantee rousing us in time. We were awakened on Monday morning at eight o'clock, and the next train left at 9.30. Thinking over it, we decided that 5.30 was rather early, after our previous day's doings, and we were not sorry we had lost the first train.

LOCH AN EILEIN CASTLE.

(The ancient stronghold of the Shaws of Rothiemurchus.)

Loch an Eilein sad and lone,
 Long has thy day of pride been gone ;
 Rothiemurchus knows no more
 The race that dwelt upon thy shore ;
 Scattered now in every clime
 Waiting the appointed time,
 When they shall return to thee—
 "FIDE ET FORTITUDINE."

Yes, Loch an Eilein, to thy shore
 Shall the Shaws draw nigh once more,
 And with a joy-inspiring strain
 Behold the Shaws arise again.

—*Old Ballad.*