

## MY CAIRNGORM EASTER.

BY WILLIAM T. PALMER,

EDITOR OF "THE FELL AND ROCK CLIMBING CLUB JOURNAL," ETC.

IN Easter week of last year (1916) I planned a five days' march—to begin at Killin, and to end, so far as walking was concerned, at Fort Augustus. I expected a certain amount of exertion, but my routes never contain anything dangerous or sensational. The first day, however, gave me a tingling. As I walked from Killin down the north shore of Loch Tay, it was just the usual April weather—squalls of warm snow or cold rain, with some pauses—chill, frozen, or thawing—between. The loch was jerked into white horses as the heavy blasts rushed on, but the clouds on the hills, though travelling at great speed, never broke. The mist-line I reckoned at about 1,000 feet up, and there was a queer blue glimmer which indicated that snow lay just within the veil. My instructions were to leave the road at a one-chimneyed cottage, and to slant upward towards the stream of Tom Breck. Beyond the first steep there was to be a narrow glen, at the head of which the path to the Ben Lawers ridge swung steeply to the right. From the top of this ridge I was to keep to the left to the summit; and it was my intention to continue beyond until there was a clear descent to Glen Lyon.

### ON BEN LAWERS IN A SNOWSTORM.

But when within the mist one felt less secure. Even on a "Baddeley" map, the route looked a tangle, with chances of trouble among crags and cornices. There was no doubt that the Ben was thick with snow. My companion, being an ice-axe, had no vote, but was a potent influence in deciding against the Killin instructions. One must make at once for the ridge though the wind thundered above. It would be better sport

wrestling with the storm than groping about a corrie choked with cloud and snow where one could never be certain of the right route. The compass fixed a line for the first peak on the ridge, and up I went. With every hundred feet there was a more vigorous resistance, yet I did not wish to lose direction by leaving the exposed buttress. The gale simply yelled, but its power did not bar progress. Really, one enjoyed the battle just as much as the white hares and ptarmigan which lobbed in and out of sight among the mist-wreaths. These creatures have far more sense than accept the quiet side of a mountain on a snow-day. The white stuff simply hurls over them as they squat in the open, head to wind. On Ben Lawers they moved very tardily, and more than once the stroke of an ice-axe might have deprived either bird or beast of life. But one was on no errand of destruction that day—and perhaps they sensed the fact.

In the scant breaks between the cloud-tides I noticed that the buttress was narrowing. Hitherto I had looked left and right across continuous snow, but now there was close on either hand the wall of gloom which is eloquent of deep abysses. The altitude felt greater too. Once the upper layers of cloud rent, and there was presence of white peaks across a narrow gulf. But never did I get a glimpse outward, or down to Loch Tay. Still heavier gusts, still denser snow-clouds, still more of blizzard drift hampered my actions. I rested a minute, bending over the ice-axe for breath, and straightened up to find the last trace of foot-prints erased, buried. Looking at the compass in such circumstances is always advisable. On a similar ridge I once met a party vigorously retracing their steps. "What's it like on the top?" I asked. The leader looked askance. "We're just going there," he said. "No, you're not," I replied, and a brief argument caused the production of a compass. The other fellows had lost nearly an hour by their about-turn, and were quite out of temper at their "absurdity." On Ben Lawers there was no such mishap—just because one was on the alert.

The long ridge which culminates in the cone of Ben Lawers is a draughty place at Easter, but who would exchange the whipping snow, the choking blizzard, the thundering gale, for the finest palm-court in the world? Certainly there was no "view"; but rambling on British hills has finer attractions than a mere wild welter of land, loch, and sea. Without an ice-axe, however, that ridge would have been a doubtful proposition, but by its aid everything became simple, and it was just a question of endurance and sticking to the correct line. Great towers of snow loomed through the mist, and in a few strides were surmounted. Then came a tremendous gulf into which the snow sheered. But these were mere practical jokes on the part of the mountain—little obstacles to scare away the timorous. At long last the great peak was tackled, but I was not really sure of success until a glance backward showed part of the cairn from which the snow had fallen. The last ten minutes gave rather a curious experience. To right and left were lines of curving blue snow, and between them a soft carpet of pure white into which one sank ankle-deep. I felt that this was a road of honour specially laid for the winter visitor to the heights.

With Ben Lawers conquered and behind, I trudged heartily into the gale, which was now rising to a veritable storm. A half-hour of steady work would carry me below the worst of the mountain, and I hoped for an early arrival at Fortingall. But it was not to be. For a moment the upper mountain blew clear, and I glanced behind, above, and around. This was indeed a narrow ridge, and deep to the right was a lochan half-filled with snow. Then the clouds shut with a vicious snap, and a tremendous squall of snow and hail made the ridge seem to rock. Progress was impossible. I drove the spike of the ice-axe deep into the hard snow, and bowed to the blast. The minutes came and went, but there was no diminution in either violence or sound. The squall seemed to rise to a crescendo of fury, and I was in danger of being hurled from my grip on the axe. Twice

the fury rose and tested my powers to the limit. As a third squall went on, I withdrew my anchor and let the storm hustle me over the edge. It was a wild glissade, but the only way out of the difficulty, and the angle of the descent was not so steep but I could control the rush. My retreat brought me down some thousand feet of easy slope in a few minutes, and down there, though the wind still plucked and the air was full of snow-dust, was comparative peace. Traversing above the lochan I soon found an easy descent to Lawers, and thence made my way down to Fearnan and over the pass to Fortingall.

#### OVER SCHIEHALLION TO KILLIECRANKIE.

My second day's excursion was to Blair Atholl, over the top of Schiehallion. The morning was clear and bright, and I wandered sedately up by the Keltney burn. Schiehallion, though 3,500 feet and more high, is an easy mountain to see and to climb. One cannot mistake its perfect pyramid nor the route up its ridge. There was a good deal of snow towards the top, but nowhere did it give trouble. By keeping to the edge, I found hard-frozen stuff, and when it came to a descent, I simply chose a line of deep, soft drift and cantered at any desired speed. My plan for the day had one serious error. I should have made directly for the head of Loch Tummel, instead of which I made across the moors to White Bridge, and then slanted down to the foot of the loch. The result was that at about seven o'clock I was whistling for the ferry opposite the Queen's View, and my map gave me no right to believe that I could trace the path across the moors to Blair Atholl in the dark. So it was that I came to the old Bridge of Garry, and walked up the throat of Killiecrankie in the gloom. It was nine o'clock when I reached the Bridge of Tilt Hotel. There was much in the day's ramble to apologise for—a late start, a dawdle over the mountain, and the uncertainty which led me the long way round by the Bridge of Garry. But no! that last needs no excuse,

for the gap of Killiecrankie in semi-darkness was a splendid sight.

#### LOST IN GLEN TILT.

My third day also suffered from a late start, but I deemed it proper to wait for letters, which of course didn't arrive. The morning was quite favourable, and I enjoyed the miles of soft road up to Forest Lodge. The waterfall about half-way up the glen was in fine order. Above Forest Lodge I passed for the first time into sheer wilderness, and met a snowstorm which provided distraction for some twenty minutes. The track was, of course, running with water; the white blanket soon sank down into the grass, disappeared, and gave no more trouble. The long trough of the Tilt seemed to run like a rapier into the heart of the mountains; I knew that the dark corrie opposite led up to Loch Loch. A sort of track seemed to clamber up the ridge to the south, which the map showed as a possible route to Beinn a' Ghlo.

The suspension bridge over the Tarf was a friend in need; otherwise I would have had to tramp miles up to the ancient fords in the upper forest. Now came the amusing part of the day: *I got lost*. Of course, the weather was to blame. A big snow-squall came sifting down the glen. One could see but a few feet ahead, and the path was broken into several independent pieces. Across a savage little burn was a good path which wound steeply—just as the col of a well-conducted glen should do. On Ben Lawers, two days before, I consulted the compass at every turn. Here it was ignored, for the snow had turned to chill sleet and I was loth to let wet and cold within my raincoat. In half an hour I was high above the deep glen, enjoying the scene thoroughly. Five ribbons of water slid down from the moor, wove in and out among crags, then burst into spray, which was sucked into great beds of scree. There were many deer hereabout—chiefly hinds and calves—and quite a lot of ptarmigan. Then, as I strolled

calmly along the drifts, dodging the water-courses and stony places, it was suddenly carried into my mind that the next swerve of the path was far more easterly than memories of the map had led me to expect. Thereupon came an unfolding of the map, and a recognition of error. But go back to the crossing—no fear! There was a possible slant over the hills which would serve very well, even if it did not save any time. Besides which, my hopes were fixed on a bed at either the Bynack shieling or at the Glen Geldie cottages, and these could not be far away. The Tilt—perhaps I should more correctly say the water which eventually becomes the Tilt—was finally crossed, just above the stream which comes down from Loch Tilt.

From this point, the going was downright nasty. The path was out of repair, and strips of snow lay in every hollow. I could never tell whether the hollow was a yard deep or merely a film of snow above some deepish pool, and the physical test of such things should always be used with caution. I trailed off here into the bog where young frogs flopped quite gaily, and out there over boulders which were often quite slippery. And here I had to consider whether it were better to leap on to a sop of wet grass, or grope round on the snow a few feet higher up. Still progress was made, and in the late afternoon I came to the Bynack level. But, though there were plenty signs of recent habitation, the cottage was closed. The bridge beyond had been sadly mishandled by the winter floods. It started well, but the last pair of supports lurched drunkenly out of perpendicular, and the sloping timber which connects with the grass-bank was entirely gone. The burn was running too deep to think of making a ford, and anyway the proposition of leaping from the bridge-end, even to a tiring man burdened with a heavy rucksack, did not seem difficult. Nor was it. At the Geldie, however, the foot-bridge was entirely missing—I saw its ruin about a mile down stream—but the riffles of a shallow pool some 200 yards back showed where the stream was fordable. The Geldie cottages were vacant—

had been for a year or more, I afterwards learned—so there was nothing for it but to continue tramping down the rough road towards the Linn of Dee. There was just sufficient light to see the great pool beneath the waterfall there, but when I reached Inverey the night was almost solid around. The march from Glen Geldie was not altogether loss. Though the clouds stretched a dark canopy from Braeriach to Ben Muich Dhui, the light poured through the Làirig Dhrù beneath, and touched its snows into flame. And one could not dispute that the sharp black cone which outlies Cairn Toul was fitly named the Devil's Point—there was a sinister, uncomfortable look about the place. I was struck, too, by the dead sterility of this upper shelf of Deeside, along which the road wound, mile after mile, apparently level.

#### STRUGGLING THROUGH THE LAIRIG.

The fourth day of the ramble involved the storming of the Làirig Dhrù, which I had been led to believe was no great feat in April. I was out of Inverey comparatively early, about eight o'clock, and rambled steadily along. The human element was elusive. There was a keeper in the timber near the opening of Glen Lui with whom I had a chat. He turned his telescope to the Làirig and commented that it was "sair black"; but that troubled me little. To-day's defeat might make to-morrow's victory, and anyway Deeside seen over the forest was a delectable place. Beyond Derry Lodge one enters into a glorious area. There is work here for a generation of artists and poets—yes, and of photographers. The twisted pines and stunted birches stand in all sorts of picturesque attitudes. They have conquered centuries of storms, of heaving wind, of rainfloods. They show the stress of a campaign which began when Britain knew nothing of civilisation. The scene suggests many a romance to the receptive mind.

Beyond the Lui Beg bridge I climbed to the open moor, and there right in front was the Devil's Point of yesterday, nearer at hand, but looking sinister and nasty as ever.

Then for half an hour I pushed through a shower of great white flakes, watching keenly ahead for the cairns or patches of track which were visible between the drifts. The distant world was lost. Then came clear air: the dark spire was right opposite, across the narrowed Glen Dee, and cutting up behind it was a gloomy gorge down which the Geusachan was bounding. Cairn Toul was visible just ahead, but Cairngorm was too steeply close to be visible. The dip of the Làirig seemed but a short distance away across the snow. The next hour or so—I had brought no watch with me, so my time-keeping is only approximate—was a horrid struggle. The snow lay deep in the coves, but every rib was black with broken stones. I stepped delicately on to the white mass, sounded a way across, and made a stride to the boulders. A few clinks here, and I was faced with another seam of soft white. The same tactics must have been needed ten score times before the path rose upward, and I had hopes of more and sounder snow and fewer ribs of rock.

But it was not to be. One trouble was simply exchanged for another. The sun had come out to watch my struggles and softened the snow-crust completely. My progress was reduced to wading thigh-deep through a horrible pasty mass, which reminded me of a venture off the beaten track in a Cornish clay mine. With great difficulty I reached the great boulder which is a landmark on the Làirig track. This was nearly level with the snow, and formed a splendid table for the meal which was long overdue. At Inverey I had only got scones and jam. No doubt meat was possible, but it is a long time since I abjured meat as a provision for walks over forest and mountains. The sun scorched me in genial blessing, and hat, gloves, raincoat, coat, came off in due order. This was simply glorious. The Garachory hung a line of black and silver in the snow-fields opposite, and away below the Dee slid down, down, down, to the dull, brown moors and the dismal grey of the glen. But it was the glory of the snow which cap-



tivated me. The rancorous Devil's Point was hidden behind the steep cliff of Cairn Toul, and from Cairn Toul the high ridge followed by the Angel's Peak, a dainty trident of snow, round to Braeriach. The afternoon light struck a glow from such snow. There were beams of silver, slabs of gold, great slopes of ivory. There were floating shadows of purple, delicate lines of pale blue, glorious mouldings of cream and grey. But king of all lights, king of all shadows, was the luminous blue which collected under the snow cornices, the great waves of which hung over the steep slopes and threatened the corries. Compared with Braeriach, Ben Muich Dhui, facing it across the pass, was a mere wall of silver-white, backed by a sky of deep azure.

I sat a while, lunching and drinking in all this beauty, probably thinking aloud—which is a bad habit among solitary rambles—"Who can believe that the Cairngorms are dull, dreary hills bereft of all colour and relief after such a scene as this?" The position was pleasant, and one's troubles seemed few. A couple of miles of snow-wading would bring me to the top of the pass. But was the pass so desirable after all! There was a well-marked line of retirement which had more attractions. I knew exactly the amount of energy which would carry me back to Derry Lodge or to Inverey. But a change came over the day. A thin cloud drifted along Braeriach and placed itself across the path of the sun. In a few minutes the temperature had tumbled considerably, and a sift of snow-flakes came down the air. I resumed some of the cast-off garments, and after a wait decided to attempt the pass. The chill might possibly render the going easier. I tramped steadily along, and found but few places where I sank knee-deep. At last one of the Pools of Dee was reached—a tiny slab of grey water beside a low snow-cliff. There was an eloquent depression in the snow farther on, which I skirted with care. A cold bath up here would be far from pleasant.

At long last the cornice at the top of the Làirig was

faced—a menacing curl which seemed about 30 feet in height. The nature of the snow had changed for the worse—a deep layer of soft pellets was laid over the older and sounder material. To surmount that cornice was a hard task single-handed. There was far more sliding backwards than I relished, and once a pretty big fragment broke off and threatened a sudden burial. Success was only won by pulling out great chunks of the soft white and pressing them firmly underfoot until the corridor rose high enough to reach the upper snow. At least half an hour was thus employed, and by this time the shadow of Braeriach was climbing apace up the wall-like Ben Muich Dhui. The far side of the pass was also corniced, but I selected a place next the main slope, and slipped down with only ten minutes' delay. After this I certainly expected fair going. There below was the trough of the Làirig, with the Lurchers' Rock, a stubborn sentinel, on the right, and Carn Elrick, a white wall, to the left. Away beyond one looked down the long snow shaft to the brown and green-blue of the larches and pines of Speyside, and further away to the moors, to the farm-lands, and to the distant sea. Here and there a line of white proclaimed high ground, beyond the gleaming blue of the Moray Firth.

But one's immediate business was the Làirig Dhrù, from which winter had filched the burn. I recalled the yarn of a mountaineer who, on such a day as this, crashed through a snow arch and provided his friends with much labour ere he was hauled again to the surface. Such a mishap would not be far from a tragedy to-day, so I coasted warily along the steep wall. The soft pellets, however, had other views, and again and again I slid downward in the midst of a tiny avalanche. But after severe struggles up, alternating with rapid slides down, I won through the steepest part of the pass, and found a line of moraine hills which offered safety even if the gaps between their tops were soft. Meanwhile the glow overhead had turned to rose, and one looked back through a softening veil to the hard-won pass. But more

IX. B

welcome was the sight of the burn escaping from its miles of snow-tunnel, and a steep slope which promised quick release from snow and toil. The Làirig path, however, swings clear of the water here, and for a mile or two there was a succession of soft drifts, mud-pools, hidden boulders, and all the wickedness a naturally bad path can muster after a winter in which torrents have been using its bed for a ploughing competition.

#### TROUBLE IN THE ROTHIEMURCHUS FOREST.

The most arduous portion of the way was indubitably behind, and, although walking without much spring, I felt far from uncomfortable. Victory was at hand, and a plume of white showed the whereabouts of Aviemore station. There was, however, quite a peck of miles still to cover. The first section, the upper forest of Rothiemurchus, was really fine. The level sun-rays picked out every fold and gully, every water-course and grass-tract, and filled with a soft glow the undergrowth of heather and bilberry, and diffused a warm light round the boles of the trees. At long last I came to the cross-roads and to the ruined stable by the pasture, and crossed the stream by a crazy foot-bridge. Five minutes' saunter beyond convicted me of error, for the next stream ran deep and impassable. Wherefore I returned and made a second cast, which discovered the Allt na Beinne bridge. From this point I expected trouble with forest roads. Baddeley on Rothiemurchus at even-tide is an earnest and depressing document. Few may pass where many are lost in the sylvan depths. But alas! there was no forest—just a wilderness of broken branches, dead stumps, and the wreck of a log railway. Still, Baddeley had served me well in other districts, and when I saw a dim light from a rough hut, enquiry was justly due to his memory. No; the lady could not direct me properly but her husband would be back from Aviemore in a few minutes, and would attend me down to the road with pleasure. When the "goodman" came home, however, I was pressed to a bit of supper, and a long talk about

bird-life in the forest followed, so that it was after eleven o'clock before my obliging host left me on the road to Coylum Bridge.

Arriving at Aviemore, I discovered the first passenger train to the south was not due till noon (it was Sunday), so that, as I had to be in England on Monday night at the latest, my intention of getting off at Kingussie in the early morning and making for the Corryarrick Pass and Fort Augustus, had to be abandoned.

I cannot claim that the walking tour here described brought out any particular lesson for brother-ramblers. It was merely a straight-ahead trip over easy ground; and I need not tell members of the Cairngorm Club how interesting it was. The cutting out of Corryarrick, however, spoilt the scheme. Possibly, when the war is over, one may be able to lay aside the burden of worry, and break again through the glorious mountain barrier which guards the Spey and the Dee. The route will quite possibly include the Spital of Glenshee, pass through Glen Geldie to the Feshie, twist south over the Minigaig and back again either by foot or rail over Drumochter, and then, at last, away west to Fort Augustus by Corryarrick. It is well to live in hope anyway.