

ABERGELDIE TO THE SHELTER STONE AND  
BACK.

BY JAMES ROSE.

Hail, Scotland ! my mother, and welcome the day  
When again I shall brush the bright dew from the brae,  
And light as a bird give my foot to the heather,  
My hand to my staff, and my face to the weather.

JOHN STUART BLACKIE.

LONG before the fellowship of mountaineering clubs existed, there was a period when the cult of the Cairngorms, under the stimulus of royalty, became to a certain extent the fashion. The hills in the season were invaded by caravans of tourists, borne on the backs of hardy Highland ponies and shepherded by guides, abhorred of honest John Hill Burton. Lochnagar and Ben Muich Dhui were chiefly favoured by these excursionists, because it was considered the right thing to "do" them, and Upper Deeside became fashionable because the Queen lived in Balmoral. It was during that period, in the early seventies of last century, but in no sense actuated by the then prevalent incentives to climbing, that the expedition I am to attempt to recall took place. Lochnagar had several times been ascended (in the first instance by way of the Black Spout) by the three youths who were to form the exploring party, and the Cairngorms beckoning afar off invited to still greater achievements.

Much consideration of the distance which separated the three from their objective, and of the means at their disposal for getting there, ended in the decision that, since they must needs walk there and back, they must victual themselves for a tramp of several days, and as they had to be their own transport, their food supplies had to be ruthlessly reduced to a minimum. In the

days of which I write, handy camping and touring equipment didn't exist—at any rate, we knew nothing of it. The knapsack of these times was a crude abomination, but in one way or another we managed to bestow our provisions and other impedimenta about our persons. A botanical box, which is still in a serviceable condition, gave a fictitious scientific effect to our party, but contained nothing more botanic than well-packed sandwiches. For sleeping accommodation over night we relied, with a confidence we had reason to regret, on the Shelter Stone.

Our walk began in the neighbourhood of Abergeldie, and to shorten our mileage we made bold to keep to the south side of the Dee, and, instead of crossing at Balmoral, to hold our course through the forest of Ballochbuie. There are fine trees still in Ballochbuie, but axe and storm have made havoc among the giants we saw on that fine September morning. The Garrawalt and the picturesque view from the old Bridge of Invercauld were taken in the morning's work, and soon we were on the highway to Braemar, seeing for the first time Craig Clunie, the Clunie Stone, and the Lion's Face; and in the enjoyment of such scenery the miles passed quickly, and soon we were in Braemar.

The various points of interest under the direction of Brown's Guide were quickly noted, and no long time was spent in the village, for we were eager to catch the first glimpse of the Cairngorms, and above all of Ben Muich Dhui. This, as everybody knows, comes soon after one passes through Braemar, and from time to time the still distant object of our journey gladdened our hearts as we hastened along towards the Linn of Dee. Of course, we had to pause to admire the falls of Corriemulzie, in these days a much finer sight from the road than now. Vegetation of recent years has much obscured the view of the falling water, and the volume of the stream is not what it used to be. We curbed our desire to see the Colonel's Bed, and pressed on to the Linn and looked upon its seething waters for the first

time; nor did we resume our journey till some at least of us had essayed the foolhardy step across, and the still more critical step back again, which was then considered the tribute that youth had to pay to the memory of Byron. But the day was wearing on, and we had reluctantly to tear ourselves from the fascinations of the Linn, and our journey was resumed.

The country we were now entering was outwith the quaint guidance of Brown, who speaks in the vaguest way of the region we were now to pass through and in such a manner as to discourage the traveller from venturing into such a wild and inhospitable land. For long, however, we had been familiar with John Hill Burton's classic, "The Cairngorm Mountains," and his example and precept had been to a large extent responsible for the plan of our expedition. Soon we had passed the tract of wooded country which had to be traversed before we could reach the valley of the Lui, but we noted on our way the first of the pines of the aboriginal forest and the charming falls of the Lui. Custom can never stale the enjoyment of this beautiful approach to the Cairngorms, and if contrast is one of the elements of the picturesque, all who have walked the four miles of the lovely valley of the Lui must recall with no ordinary pleasure their first experience of this placid scene, so unlike the rugged grandeur that lies beyond.

The day was waning, however, and many miles of rough scrambling lay before us, so we pushed on, passing Derry Lodge without infringing its privacy, for it was then the height of the shooting season and the Lodge was in full occupation by the late Duke of Fife, then Viscount Macduff.

It was from this point that the counsels of the writer of "The Cairngorm Mountains" led us to shun the weary Glen Derry, and take the more direct, if somewhat more arduous route of Glen Lui Beg. All seemed going well, and we were already far up the glen, when a whistle and a shout made us call a halt, and speedily we were joined by two irate keepers, who said we must not

go farther that way—Glen Derry was open to us but the Lui Beg was barred. The prospect of having to retrace our steps at this late hour of the evening—it was then about six o'clock—was not one we cared to entertain, and the keepers, when they heard our plans, proved to be reasonable men, for as we had the look of innocent trespassers on the sanctuary of the deer, they offered no further objections to our continuing on our way.

They knew, too—what we then had little conception of—the long way that lay before us ere we could reach the precincts of the Shelter Stone. A question we put as we set off must have proved our harmlessness beyond a doubt. We asked—“Whereabout is Ben Muich Dhui?” Back came the astonishing reply—“Lord! that's Ben Muich Dhui!” We were on its very slopes and did not know it!

All who have climbed the Ben from the Lui Beg will allow that we had no easy task before us, laden as we were and feeling somewhat our long trudge from Abergeldie. Suffice it to say, that after many a toilsome effort up those interminable slabs, that form a kind of giant's stairway on this side of the mountain, we at last reached the summit, and had gone some way on our descent when, in the rapidly waning light, we caught a glimpse of water. Never did Greeks more gladly shout “Thalassa!” than did we give vent to our glee at the sight of what we took to be Loch Avon and the end of our day's pilgrimage. On we hurried, but soon our mirth was changed to sorrow, for the loch we were approaching would by no process of reasoning fit into our conception of Loch Avon, and before long we had to make up our minds that we had only reached Loch Etchachan, and that Loch Avon lay yet in the distance.

By this time it was almost dark, and the way between the two lochs is not one in which “way-faring men, though fools, may not err,” but we did at last come in sight of the true Loch Avon, dimly visible, at a great depth below, from the brow of the steep descent to it. Big as is the Shelter Stone, it was but a pebble on

the beach where all the features of nature were on such a gigantic scale, and we had reluctantly to decide that we should get no shelter from the Clach Dian that night. We felt, indeed, that the lee side of any decently-sized boulder was preferable to further search for the object of our journey.

It was rather a cheerless bivouac we made, at a height of over 3000 feet. There were some feeble attempts to gather heather to modify the harshness of the underlying rocks, and in happier circumstances we should soon have been sleeping the sleep of exhausted nature. The cold wind, however, and the clammy mists that kept continually drifting across our comfortless resting-place made sleep impossible, through the weary hours of what seemed an endless night. At length a palid apology for dawn put an end to our miserable night watch, and we rose from our lair behind a big stone which had mitigated to some extent the rigour of the cold mists, straightened out our cramped limbs, and proceeded to take counsel together.

We were all agreed that the pleasures of a night on the hillside had been much over-rated, and that a succession of such nights, according to our original plans, was not to be thought of, but that we must at least, in fairness, interview the Shelter Stone before coming to a final decision.

Accordingly, in due time we descended to the level of Loch Avon and reached that imposing, but much over-praised "lodge in the wilderness," and found it untenanted that morning. The privilege of having it all to ourselves did not unduly elate us, however. We consumed a modest and very early breakfast, and tried to become enthusiastic about our surroundings, as they presented themselves on a raw and gloomy morning. Someone has spoken of "two in the morning courage," but three in the morning enthusiasm is about as rare a virtue, and none of us possessed it on that occasion. The long and the short of it was that we decided without a division that we should postpone our further ac-

quaintance with Loch Avon and its wonders to a more suitable season, and forthwith retrace our steps.

It would be unprofitable to enlarge upon our return journey. Many can fill in the picture. The day showed no signs of improvement—low clouds and no sunshine; and we had just got through the dreary and most uninteresting part of Glen Derry, when we met what was more common then than it is now—a large party of Braemar visitors, partly on foot and partly on ponies, and in charge of a guide. They must have made an early start from the village, and were no doubt flattering themselves that they would be first on the hill that morning when we hove in sight. The two parties soon met and we were bombarded with all sorts of questions which we endeavoured to satisfy.

The rest of our return journey was without incident of note until we had almost reached its end. The bridge at Balmoral had been crossed, and we were passing the Albert Statue, as evening was closing in, and a drizzling rain had begun to fall, when an outrider dashed past us, followed soon after by the Royal carriage with Queen Victoria out for her evening drive, which she took in all kinds of weather. Anon we were climbing the Distillery Brae, and, shortly after, our long and practically continuous two days' tramp came to an end.

Though our first visit to the Cairngorms had not met with all the success we had anticipated, the rebuff—which the mountains are so prone to administer to those who intrude upon their solitudes—served only in our case to whet our desire to learn more of the charm and mystery of the hills. The fact that it was the first visit makes it stand out in our recollections when the memories of more fortunate days—days more arduous, or fuller of incident—have faded or become blurred in the lapse of years.