

THREE NIGHTS ON THE CAIRNGORMS.

BY SIR HUGH T. MUNRO, BART.

AS I was a contributor to the first number of the *Cairngorm Club Journal*, the Editor has asked me to write something for the fiftieth number. I respond readily; but as my climbing days began upwards of forty-three years ago in the Alps, it is inevitable that anything I now write must be rather the reminiscences of a dotard than the experiences of an active climber. Nevertheless, I still aspire to stand on the summit of the only three "tops" in Scotland exceeding 3,000 feet in height which I have not yet climbed. Raeburn, Collie, Garden, and others, however, must combine to haul me up on a rope; otherwise the ascents will not be made!

I am minded to tell briefly of three night adventures on the Cairngorms.

At 8.45, on a lovely frosty morning in the month of February, I left Lynwilg—there were no hotels at Aviemore in those days. There are few more beautiful places than Rothiemurchus Forest, with its fine old Scotch firs and luxuriant heather, its open glades and glistening tarns, its views across Loch Morlich and Glenmore and over Strathspey to the Monadhliaths. But that same luxuriant heather makes uncommonly troublesome walking, and the numerous tracks are all shaped like corkscrews, and all apparently lead nowhere; and so it was 2.40 p.m. before the summit of Cairngorm was reached. By this time the mist was rolling over the top of Braeriach and creeping up the valleys to the south-west. I was well accustomed, however, to finding my way over the hills alone in all kinds of weather, and though I was soon in thick

mist I reached the top of Ben Muich Dhui without difficulty and without misgiving. But it was now 4.30. I dashed off down the hard-frozen snow in what I believed to be the direction of Loch Etchachan, and at 5 o'clock, having descended 1,000 feet, I found myself, just at the bottom margin of the mist, on the top of the precipices overhanging Loch Avon. Here was a pleasant predicament to be in! Long past sunset, dangerous cliffs all around, and the mist freezing to one's hair, beard, and clothes! The cold was so intense that I did not think it would have been possible to live through the night without moving, and yet there seemed little prospect of my getting out of my precarious position before it got quite dark. I had no flask with me and little food.

I dashed up a hard-snow slope, hauling myself up with the point of my axe, for there was no time to cut steps, crossed an intervening ridge, and again descended—only to find myself among even worse cliffs, and still above Loch Avon. A last look at the map and compass in the dim light, and another race up a long steep slope with the help of the axe. Time was too precious to stop and take breath even for a minute. A wide sweep round, and then, bearing to the left, an easy descent over snow that evidently filled the bed of a burn; and I was deeply thankful to find myself, at 5.45 on a dark night in early February, 3,100 feet above sea-level, on the shores of the frozen Loch Etchachan. After a tedious walk in pitch darkness I reached Derry Lodge at 8.30.

This was the first of many visits paid to Derry Lodge; and I should like here to pay a tribute to the kindness, hospitality, and courtesy of Donald Fraser, the late stalker. His daughter, too, was most assiduous in her attentions. She collected post-cards, and I have had the pleasure of sending her some from many outlandish parts of the world.

Fraser had, of course, as most of the Cairngorm Club know, many reminiscences of the Royal Family and of foreign princes, including the Kaiser, who had stalked

in Mar Forest. He told me that the finest rifle shot he had ever known was Prince Henry of Battenberg. On one occasion he was stalking with the Prince and had brought him in sight of the deer, but said—"We can't get within shooting distance." The Prince replied—"Surely you can take me to those peat hags." "Yes," Fraser responded, "but they are more than 400 yards away from the stag." "Take me there, and I will shoot it through the heart." He did so. Years after, in 1914, I had the honour of sitting next to Princess Henry at luncheon. As it happened, she had on a coat the buttons of which were made of deer's teeth taken from deer which Prince Henry had killed. I told her Fraser's verdict on her husband's shooting and I think she was pleased.

Fraser spent the long months of winter in mounting deer's heads. He had the opportunity of getting any number of the cast horns of stags, and, as he himself told me, he could usually make a much better and more symmetrical head than nature could produce, for as a rule the two sides of a stag's head differ very considerably.

Mrs. Fraser, when a child of twelve, accompanied by a girl two years older, walked from Braemar to some place in the Carse of Gowrie. Her parents had arranged that the two girls should spend two nights on the way. The first night was to be spent at the Kirkton of Glenisla; but as their route lay down Glenshee, this would have taken them out of their way, so they decided to go on to the next sleeping-place. When they reached it, however, they became ambitious of doing the whole journey in one walk, so they continued on, and did the whole fifty miles without a rest. I doubt if there are many members of the Cairngorm Club, or of the Scottish Mountaineering Club, who could do as much.

But this has very little to do with the Cairngorms or with mountaineering.

I will now tell of two other nights, this time voluntarily spent on the Central, and Eastern Cairngorms.

Once, a dozen or more years ago, I and a friend left Aviemore in the late afternoon of the 18th of June—Waterloo Day. We made our way through the Rothiemurchus and Glenmore Forests until, at about 10.30 at night, we found ourselves at the foot of what on the Ordnance map is called Fiacail Coire an't Sneachda. It is a narrow and steep ridge running up to the summit plateau, which, in spite of some snow lying about, was quite easy, and did not even suggest the rope. Here we got into a thin mist. As most members of the Cairngorm Club will know, the big pasture-like land extending from Cairngorm by Coire an't Sneachda to Ben Muich Dhui is an undulating moorland, across which it would be possible to canter a pony. The Cairngorms are, in fact, not true mountains, but rather a table-land which denudation has raised to the rank of mountains. And while no one would venture to compare them with the wild boldness of the Western hills, such as the Cuillins—*facile princeps*, the first among Scottish mountains—the Glencoe or the Donald mountains, for instance, not to mention many another range, the Cairngorms—the central range of the Grampians—have a certain reposeful grandeur, an indication of *strength*, which is unique in Scotland.

The original programme had been ambitious. I don't quite remember what we had meant to do, but I know our plan had included Beinn Mheadhoin and half the Eastern Cairngorms. We did not accomplish it. My friend did not like the very thin mist on the hills, and, although it had not been thick enough to make the use of the compass necessary between Fiacail Coire an't Sneachda and Ben Muich Dhui, my friend contended that it was not weather for a night on the hills, and that we had better seek a lower elevation as soon as possible. I gave in to him, but insisted on crossing the top above Coire an Sput Dheirg (4,095 ft.) and Sron Riach (3,534 ft.). The names and heights of these two subsidiary summits of Ben Muich Dhui are found only on the 6-inch map. The walk down the glen to Braemar

will ever linger in my memory. The short summer night—it was within three days of the longest day—was already past before we reached the glen. The unnatural midnight twilight had already given place to daylight. Suddenly a bird—a thrush, I think—began to sing, and in a few moments the whole country-side seemed to be alive with the songs of the birds. Great stags were all over the place, peacefully grazing by the roadside. I had a rather long walking-stick, and on one occasion I lunged out, saying—“Here! you get out of that!” and hit a big stag—a Royal—on the haunch. We reached Braemar about 4.30 on a glorious summer morning, and actually disturbed a dozen big stags feeding in the flower gardens in the centre of the village. With some trouble we woke up the people at the Fife Arms, and were royally entertained.

One more Cairngorm excursion I may perhaps be permitted to describe. One hot afternoon in July, Garden, Duncan, and I left Aberdeen by train. We dined at Ballater, and, later, drove up Glen Gairn to a point which I am now unable to indicate, but it was somewhere very near Loch Builg. Our first point was the big brae of Ben Avon. In turn, we topped all the summits of Ben Avon as well as of Beinn a' Bhuid. For an hour we lay down and dozed near the summit of Ben Avon, but, though the days were intensely hot, the proximity of a big patch of snow chilled the air, and we did not care to rest for very long. It was 5.30 the following evening before we reached Braemar, and I have still a vivid recollection of the rankness of the heather and the “glegs” in Glen Quoich; also of the luxury of a tepid bath, a plate of clear turtle, and a bottle of champagne at the Fife Arms that Sunday night.