

A TEMPEST IN THE LAIRIG.  
EXCITING JOURNEY THROUGH THE PASS.

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*[A very violent gale from the south-west, accompanied by heavy rain, prevailed in many parts of Scotland on Sunday, 6th October last, numerous trees being blown down and other damage caused. Two well-known members of the Club who essayed to walk through the Lairig Dhrù that day had a thrilling experience, which is narrated below. The story is very modestly told, no mention being made, for instance, of the fact that both gentlemen were bruised and cut by the buffeting of the storm to which they were subjected.—EDITOR.]*

Although members of the Cairngorm Club for more years than we care to remember, we had never gone through, or even entered, the Lairig Dhrù. Often had we expressed the intention of doing so, and more than once had we made tentative arrangements to carry out our design, but circumstances somehow had always compelled an adjournment. So time went on ; and, as we are now getting near an age when strenuous walking or hill work will have to be given up, we determined upon making the walk through the famous Pass ere it be too late. We definitely fixed upon the first week-end in October for the purpose, and agreed that weather at all events should not interfere with our intended journey ! So we despatched our bags to Braemar and made arrangements to follow them by way of Speyside.

Owing to an enforced late hour of starting and to the present reduced railway facilities, we could only reach Boat of Garten the first night. Next morning we enjoyed the walk to Aviemore, and later on the same day



a very pleasant stroll to Loch Alvie. Everything indicated decent weather conditions, although there was a decided divergence of opinion on this all-important matter between two "locals" we chanced to meet at different points. We fixed 7 a.m. for the start, and arranged to drive a part of the way to the Allt-na-Beinne Bridge. So far so good!

By the time that the hour of starting arrived—and, indeed, many hours before—the weather conditions had undergone a decided change for the worse. The wind howled round the hotel and lashed the windows with heavy rain. We thought of two friends who had experienced a somewhat similar day just a fortnight before; but they had reached the other side all safe and we had said we were to follow! The trap (a dog-cart) was at the door, and we boarded it about an hour behind scheduled time. Our driver informed us that he had seen "some" roads in South Africa, and he imparted this further item of information—that we would see "some" roads hereabouts before the end of our drive. We did! No wonder the vehicle we were seated on was the only one fit for such a journey. The axles and wheels of others had gone one by one, and the blacksmith and the cartwright were otherwise engaged nowadays!

After leaving the main road and entering the Rothiemurchus Forest, we began to see indications of the truth of our driver's remark. The force of the wind, too, began to be felt, and progress was soon reduced to a walking pace, our veteran "trekker" dexterously guiding the nag as it gamely threaded its way over the roughest parts, while the trap swayed and jolted in an alarming manner as the gusts of wind hit it, requiring firm holding on by us to escape being pitched out. An occasional glance over the shoulder satisfied the one of us in front that the other seated behind was still there. At length we were informed that the driving part of the journey on this side was over, and we descended. We bade our good friend the driver Adieu!



and we thought from his looks that he "had his doots" as to our subsequent progress. We had "burned our boats," however, and our "change" was at Braemar.

The sight of the beautiful bridge over the Beinne, erected by the Club and opened in August 1912, aroused within us feelings of gratitude to those whose wisdom and foresight had planned and carried out such a boon. The state of the Beinne here would have made a crossing under the former conditions, if not impossible, at any rate dangerous in the highest degree; but we had an easy crossing now, and were glad that we had more than the breadth of a plank or two to walk on, considering the force of the wind. The utility of the bridge was obvious in our case, and we fancy others, coming on the Beinne in flood, have been equally thankful for its existence. Had the weather permitted, we should have liked further time to examine and admire the structure. The rain had increased to "heavy," however, and the wind was acquiring the character of "gale." So with the Beinne sounding an ominous note in our ears we commenced the forward movement. Here we may say that, although we had provided ourselves with useful maps and a copy of that most admirable description of the route through the Lairig given in the *C.C.J.* (Vol. III., pp. 55-58), access to either was impossible, and we were thankful that we had long since adopted the latter as a mental map. We had noted while driving how accurately and clearly that article described that part of the route, and we should have found it equally accurate and serviceable through the Pass but for the abnormal weather conditions.

No difficulty, therefore, had we in getting on the right track "To Braemar," as a board on the side of the path indicates, but before we had gone 100 yards or so, we fully agreed with the expressed opinion of others who have preceded us that it is "an awful track in wet weather!" We were soon soaked to the knees owing to the length and condition of the heather, and to the



water running in streams along and athwart the path, under our boots and quite as frequently over them. At length we got out of the wood (in one sense) and into open upland moor ground; and here we first caught it! Before either of us could crouch, we were "downed" and lay holding on to the heather while the wind and rain drove over us with hurricane force. To rise until there was a lull to half-a-gale was impossible, and so we remained anchored until an opportunity offered to get a move on, only to result in our being speedily driven to earth (or stone) again. In this way we slowly battled on for some time, gaining a little headway now and then, but anything like substantial progress being greatly impeded. Never had we experienced the force of such a gale. Wet we were to the skin in spite of our Burberrys, and icy cold too; and we were not yet in sight of the top. The position was getting serious, and we felt it; and maybe that made us desperate, and perhaps even a little reckless. We could not turn, for such a force of wind behind would have led to disaster sooner or later, little or no warning being given of the approach of the blasts that brought us down. Access to watch, maps, or even to such refreshment as our knapsacks contained, was impossible. We had taken our time at leaving the Beinne Bridge at 9.40, and we reckoned that three hours would have elapsed since then. Occasionally the spindrift from the hillsides and pools came driving towards us in great white clouds like snowdrift and fairly blinded us, making progress impossible. At last we thought we were at the top of the pass, but found to our dismay it was only "the one before." Hereabouts, a remark from one of us that he wished we could see the Angel's Peak drew from the other the grim reply that we might see the angels first. We did not refer to the "Satanic" Peak! The risk of injury to limb was getting very apparent, and was brought vividly before one of us when the other, caught in one of the fiercest gusts, was seen spinning like a feather in an eddy of wind (and he was



the heavier of the two) and threatening a bad downfall at every step. His progress under different conditions would have elicited mirth and approbation for agility, but the situation was too serious for hilarity, and there were no two more thankful men than we when he came down, as he was bound to eventually, but without mishap beyond another severe shaking.

We were now in the region of stones, and here the track has been described as being difficult to follow "notwithstanding the aid of a large number of direction cairns." We were most grateful for these cairns, and only regret that, owing to weather conditions, it was impossible for us, as good hillmen, to add a stone to each cairn. We had temporary shelter from the full force of the wind while creeping up here, and made steady if very slow progress, but the necessity of presenting the crown of the head to the blast prevented any observation of the surroundings, although there was indeed little except driving rain and cloud to be seen. Occasionally the precipices glistened for a minute and were then obscured, but the thunder of the torrents all round and the shriek of the wind were ever in our ears. It was not long before we discovered that we had been drifting unconsciously too far to our right, for, sometime after we got over the top of the Pass and towards what we believed to be the Pools of Dee (pools there were everywhere and of all sizes), while plunging and battling still against a high wind—though not so strong now that we were getting to a lower level—suddenly we found ourselves in a glack, with a raging, swollen stream in front of us, and no prospect of a crossing unless we retraced our steps towards the Pools! The day was getting on and we knew we were a considerable distance from Derry Lodge. Wetter or colder we could not be. We retraced our steps for some distance, but on second thoughts decided to follow the course frequently taken in such circumstances—plunge into the stream and wade across, with boots and stockings on. We did so, and



icy cold the water was ; but we soon found ourselves faced with the necessity of taking a second and similar plunge, which we did. We have since fixed our position here as at the point on the Cairngorm Club Map, 1895, where the Allt a Choire Mhoir joins the Dee. We had got to the right of the latter and come down as far as the Allt a Gharbh Choire which we first involuntarily crossed, and then we had to cross again to the proper side of the Dee! Soon we had still "another river to cross"—this time the Allt Clach nan Taillear, a swollen turbulent stream with not a trace of a stepping-stone to be seen.

Here, however, we seemed to get on the right rails again. Although cold, wet, and weary, we made better headway, and eventually we sighted some trees and verdure in the distance. Soon after we descended to a foot-bridge, crossed the Luibeg Burn, and finally reached Luibeg Cottage, where we made the acquaintance of that excellent couple, Mr. and Mrs. Macdonald, who provided us with a most grateful cup of tea and a momentary heat at a cheery log fire. Then we made across the bridge to Derry Lodge, where we found our trap in waiting, along with the surprised driver thereof, who admitted that he never expected us to "come through." Our feelings of thankfulness were, if possible, increased when he produced two huge warm coats, very thoughtfully sent by our good hostess of the Invercauld Arms, Braemar. The drive to that most excellent of Highland hotels was undoubtedly a cold one in our condition, but what it would have been without the comfort of those coats we shiver to think. Arrived there, needless to say we were soon in clover (i. e., hot bath—very hot); and later, seated before ample fare, we became almost forgetful of this our first experience of the Làirig Dhrù.

At several points of our exciting journey we vowed that never again would we venture into that region—others before us have made a similar vow, we believe.



Now, however, after a week or two of home comforts, we have forgotten our first experience to some extent, and we are not so sure that we will keep that vow—just as the others have failed to keep it. Should we change our minds, we shall hope to be able to give a different and a better account of our second excursion.

May we sound a warning note to those who enter the Pass from the Aviemore side for the first time, as we did? Keep to the left, even to the shoulder of Ben Muich Dhui, if your objective is Derry Lodge; otherwise, you may find yourself well on the way to or actually arrive at the White Bridge by holding through Glen Dee. Might the Club not face the expense of a guiding post about the point between the Pools of Dee and the Allt a Choire Mhoir?