

THE LAIRIG DHRU IN CALM.*

BY JAMES A. HADDEN AND JAMES CONNER.

ALTHOUGH having quite in mind the old proverb "Once bitten, twice shy," the writers of these notes decided again to venture their luck in a tramp through the Làirig Dhrù. On a previous occasion—in the first week of October, 1918—we met with such a hostile reception from the elements that it seemed to us then unlikely that we should again run the risk of probably a similar experience. Looking back after the lapse of two years, however, the seriousness of the difficulties then encountered do not seem to have the same magnitude, while certain pleasant memories remain as vivid as ever. We are inclined to affirm that whether the passage of the Làirig be attempted when the Pass is in one of its angriest moods, when the swirling mists and blinding rain are propelled against you at tempest velocity, or when the forces of Nature are on their best behaviour, the Pass has a lure which is irresistible. We have now had experience of it under both conditions. On the occasion about to be described the fates were propitious. For a short respite from the stress and worry of city life—a modest Saturday to Monday excursion—there are in our view few walks to equal it and none to surpass it. Certainly, the walk through Glen Tilt is a charming one, but the beauties of that glen are "tame and domestic" in comparison with the Làirig. The situation of the latter, piercing as it does the great Cairngorm range, is a recommendation sufficient in itself, but the solitude of it and the wild grandeur of its scenery appeal to one at once. True it is that to reach it entails a rather long railway journey; but the ultimate result is worth the journey, and there is the advantage that, from whichever end one approaches the Làirig, there is

* See "A Tempest in the Làirig," *C.C.J.*, vol. ix., 173.

no monotonous and uninteresting country to traverse as a preliminary.

As has already been indicated, our journey through the Pass was on this occasion made under the most favourable weather conditions. Leaving Aberdeen on the Saturday preceding the August Bank Holiday by the afternoon train, we arrived about 9 o'clock at Boat of Garten, where the night was spent under the hospitable roof of the hostelry there, in years gone by well known to most members of the Cairngorm Club, and which under its present management has lost none of its traditions. Next morning we were up betimes, and a smart drive landed us at Coylum Bridge at 8.30. There was a considerable nip in the morning air, but before the Allt-na-Beinne Bridge was reached the chilly feeling had worn off, and throughout the remainder of the day the weather was ideal for walking. The numerous paths through the Rothiemurchus Forest are a little bewildering, but, following the advice given in an article in the *Club Journal*, to "keep your eye on the V-shaped gap in the hills in front," one is bound to arrive at the Bridge—the Club's Bridge—eventually. We think we have read somewhere a reference to the Saw-Mill as a direction, and it may be as well to mention, for the benefit of future pedestrians unfamiliar with the ground, that it is now demolished. A small hut still remains, however. The bridge was duly inspected, and pronounced to be in perfect order. We have since learned that, shortly after our visit, some of the steps were found to be broken. As we believe the cause has been traced to the pranks of a four-footed animal, we feel exonerated from any complicity in the affair. But to resume—a steady pace along the burnside and across the meadow soon brought us to the direction post at the entrance to the Pass proper, but, to use an Irishism, the post is not there. The upright remains, but the directing arm which is the essential, has vanished.*

* A new post, with a proper "directing arm," has since been erected by the Club.—EDITOR.

Soon we were through the wood—Oh, that heather!—and breasting the hill, which was quite an easy task in the invigorating mountain air. As we ascended the Pass, many backward glances were directed to the beautiful landscape about Aviemore and that part of the Valley of the Spey within the range of vision. Although the Rothiemurchus Forest has suffered considerable damage from the recent fire, the area affected is comparatively small when viewed from a distance, and it cannot be said that the fire has destroyed the sylvan beauty of the region. In our progress through the Pass we had no difficulty in following the path, although at times it was somewhat indistinct, and even the crossing of the boulders presented little difficulty, so well marked is the track by the numerous cairns, to each of which we duly added a double quota, to compensate for our enforced failure to contribute on the former occasion. This part of the journey, however, is very tedious and requires to be negotiated with considerable care. There is not much opportunity for sky-gazing, but, while taking a “breather,” on looking up the Pass our attention was at once arrested by the extraordinary glitter on a precipitous slope in the far distance. Was it the effect of the sun upon snow or water or polished rock? At one time the appearance suggested a flow of water all over the surface; at another, the flow seemed to stop and the sun to be glinting only on a moist surface; while, as a passing cloud partially obscured the sun, we concluded that the surface had a thin coating of snow. When at last we were opposite the spot, there was nothing to account for the glitter first noticed, though we were looking at the face of the same precipitous slope (part of Braeriach) on which it appeared. Given favourable weather conditions, however, one witnesses endless changes of light and shade in the Làirig.

Once past the boulders, you may with freedom feast your eyes on the precipitous slopes of Ben Muich Dhui and the stupendous crags towering hundreds of feet above you. In the pages of the *Club Journal* many

contributors have already done justice to the wild grandeur of the scene, and any attempt on our part to improve on these word pictures would be presumptuous. We are afraid, moreover, that we have already trespassed too much on the Editor's space; and as the day was by this time wearing on, we must needs be getting on too, if we were to keep our appointment at the Linn of Dee. Having paid due homage to the quality of the water at the Pools of Dee—not, perhaps, on strictly "Pussyfoot" lines—we resumed our journey, and soon were pacing down Glen Dee, pausing frequently to admire the magnificent precipices and corries of Braeriach and Cairn Toul, on the latter of which (round the Angel's Peak) the mist hung like a pall. About here we raised a small covey of partridges, and it struck us as rather curious that that was the only manifestation of animal life we had seen the whole day, always, of course, excluding the winged insects which were encountered in battalions while traversing the forest. To show how absolutely solitude was on this occasion a feature of the Pass, we may mention that, with the exception of an old lady whom we met going for the morning milk shortly after leaving Coylum Bridge, not a single human being did we encounter, not even while passing Lui Beg or Derry Lodge: time did not permit of our calling at either. After passing Derry Lodge, the mile or two to the Linn was soon covered, and we arrived at the Linn itself at 5.45 p.m.: we reached our trap only fifteen minutes late. Soon we were comfortably transported to our quarters for the night at the Invercauld Arms, Braemar, where, needless to say, we had the kind welcome and attention always given to members of the Cairngorm Club.