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“I WILL LIFT UP MINE EYES . . .”

BY R. GORDON WASSON.

IN the drenching downpour of that Friday afternoon, the last day of the year, I boarded the train at Aberdeen for Braemar, a kit-bag in one hand, an ice-pick in the other, and a glowing enthusiasm within me which rain-torrents could not quench. For I was off for the Highlands, the rugged hills of Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson, the mystic land of the wild adventures of my childhood's visions. Who dared say I was in a strange land amidst a strange people? The Grampians, where Norval's father fed his flocks! There had my spirit been fed, too, though my body had received its nourishment on a distant shore. I was no mere tourist prying around foreign countries; my excursion was rather a long-deferred home-coming, and it is small wonder that clouds and rain could not dampen my ardour.

And what a night was that first night in Braemar! The Cairngorm Club made me feel, indeed, that I was returning home, and the Hogmanay celebration far exceeded my sanguine expectations. But I think it is more seemly, perhaps, for the story of the festivities to be retained fondly in the memories of those who participated in them, rather than that its details should be made bare on the printed page.

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On New Year's Day I was one of the party of five who took a delightful jaunt in the vicinity of Lochnagar. We circled Cairn Taggart around the north, the sleet and clouds rendering its summit inaccessible. Far below us stretched away endlessly towards the horizon the lonesome, rolling, barren hills, broken into shifting patches of shade and light by the scudding clouds, their soft, peaceful curves carrying a solemn message of fathomless age, of eternal sameness. The occasional whirr of a frightened grouse or ptarmigan, the passage of a stray eagle, the distant silhouette of a solitary stag, seemed to symbolize the tranquil evening of life, seemed to foreshadow the gently approaching hand of everlasting death.

After lunch we ascended the Stui Butress, a pretty piece of harmless rock-climbing. For the first time in the day we now caught a glimpse of the summit of Lochnagar, etched against a bright sky in a frame of black, heavy-laden clouds. But swiftly approaching darkness obliged us reluctantly to turn our backs to it, and, striking the trail on the plateau, we followed it to Loch Callater.

Sunday turned out to be a stupendous day. A party of eight of us did Ben Muich Dhui under ideal conditions.

The long drive to Derry Lodge was bitterly cold. Our horses' hoofs rang metallically on the frost-stuck stones in the road, and the animals snorted out volumes of cloudy vapour as they trotted vigorously along. The bracing air was charged with dazzling sunlight, and the enchanting mountain vistas filled us with enthusiasm for the day's climb. Near Inverey we passed a few village women, bedecked in their sober Sunday best, setting out resolutely on foot for Mass at Braemar. We dashed over the Linn of Dee, with its endless roar, and then on and on for miles, till at last the Lodge was reached, and our work began.

We did the weary pull to the summit by way of the long shoulder that descends into Glen Lui Beg. The sun shone bright and hot on our backs, and not till we

had cleared the level of the surrounding ridges were we favoured by refreshing whiffs of mountain breeze. Up to within a few minutes of reaching the summit, our view of the surrounding world was clear—too clear for my taste. The sharp, distinct outline of summits and ridges and slopes serves well enough for topographical study; but for scenic effect I prefer that a faint haze should soften lines and blend tints, so that glaring and deceptive definiteness may melt into the unknowable truths of mystery.

I was therefore not entirely disappointed when we found that we should have to attain the summit by plunging into a slight cloud bank. Our way now led us over a snow-and-ice-field, tightly enough packed to sustain us. We were in a world of white—white above, below, and around us, broken only by the softened rays of a bulging ball of fire in the sky. At the cairn we stopped only long enough to consume some lunch, the first food we had taken.

We had hardly started the descent when a strange thing happened. The sun, low down on our right, drove away the mist, rolling it up in a wall on our left, and outlined on that wall of haze we saw the spectre of the Brocken—our own figures, magnified, and encircled in a rainbow halo, with another transcending rainbow above. Some one suggested that here we saw the legendary spectre of Ben Muich Dhui; it seemed to me we were seeing far more than that—that we were in the presence of the gods of Ossian and Beowulf, in the presence of Thor and Woden and Frida, of the mighty gods of the northern mists. As we, petty weaklings, swung our twig-like ice-picks, they responded with their gigantic clubs and battle-axes. And then the vision faded into nothingness.

We descended to Derry Lodge along the south-eastern ridge, clipping the summits of Derry Cairngorm and Carn Crom as we went. We skipped rapidly along, sliding and running down snow-banks, or stepping nimbly through rock-fields, stopping frequently to quench

our thirst in the rich, snow-cold water of the threading streams, and finally dropping over the nose of the ridge down to the Lodge as night was falling—a clear, brisk, moon-lit night. In a few minutes our horses were eagerly trotting us homewards.

I had had my glimpse of the Scottish Highlands.

Less lofty, less rugged than the mountains of Switzerland, the hills of Scotland are melancholy where the Alps are threatening, solemn where they are august, lovable where they are awesome. Far withdrawn from the tumult of man's activities, the incessant, self-absorbed hurly-burly of our cities, the grimy fogs which we breathe, and those other fogs, no less grimy because spiritual, into which we wantonly plunge our social relations—they preserve eternal peace and tranquillity. May it not be time that we turn to them once more, as did a nameless poet 2,500 years ago—that we lift up our eyes unto them, whence cometh our help?