

A WALK TO GLEN AFFRIC AND GLEN SHIEL.

BY JAMES STEWART.

FROM many hilltops have I gazed with longing on those majestic—and to me, for many years, inaccessible—mountains that mirror themselves in Loch Affric; and it was the lure of them that sent G. and me on a pilgrimage from the Moray Firth to Loch Duich during July of fateful 1914. We took with us our little brown tent that has sheltered us o' nights in many out-of-the-way corners, and on a Saturday, somewhere near midnight, we set forth from the station at Inverness. An interesting and at times eerie walk by way of Dores brought us to Torness as dawn was flushing the tops of the Monadh Liath, and we encamped near Abersky.

Monday morning saw us striding down Strath Farigaig, passing on the way that formidable outcrop of rock on which Professor Bryce was killed. Loch Ness was crossed amidst mist and rain, and beneath the hoary ruins of Castle Urquhart we took to the highway again. In the recesses of memory there hover visions of a melancholy forest of dripping trees—mostly birch, oak, and hazel—which thins as the road climbs to the upper reaches of the glen; then a stretch of moorland, swept by wind and rain; and then a quick descent through another birken forest, and we were at Cannich in Strath Glass. That Cannich is a pretty place I can well believe, but with the rain I can only recall a reading-room, a church, and a hotel. Late at night we pitched our tent at the foot of a fir-tree amidst the wild grandeur of Chisholm's Pass. For a time it was a sober kind of camp. We were drenched to the skin, our ground sheet was damp, and for the first time in its history wee Primus took a "thrawn" turn. In time, however, we

managed to induce Primus to mend his ways, and when he had done so the world did not seem quite so inhospitable. Warm tea thawed us out, and later, from the snug retreat of our sleeping-bags, we could laugh at rain and fatigue.

Glints of blue were showing through the clouds when we awakened next morning, and an hour or so later, as we made our way by the shores of Loch Beinn a' Mheadhoin, the sun was imaged in its peaceful depths. We went up Glen Feodoch a bit in an endeavour to ascertain the possibilities of an ascent of Carn Eighe, but glimpses of grim precipices showing through rents in the enfolding mist decided us to hold on our way westward. As far as Affric Lodge the road is good; beyond that, one must follow a track of sorts. It is here that the wayfarer comes into his kingdom. No wheeled monster can "hoot" him out of the way; the pedestrian, sound in wind and limb, reigns supreme. And what a kingdom to enter upon! The magic beauty of Loch Affric, the colour and majesty of the mountains, the strongly rooted dusky-plumed pines, the music of the "sky-born streams," and the all-pervading atmosphere of peacefulness fill the soul with a quiet delight. Nature here has scattered loveliness around with no niggard hand, and if a poet big enough to sing the beauty of the glen has not yet appeared, a great landscape painter has at times found inspiration in it. Late in the afternoon we arrived at a stalker's cottage away "at the back of beyond," where kindness, personified in the stalker and his wife, made us comfortable for the night.

A sky of unsullied blue next morning tempted us to spend a day on the hills. Ben Fhada (Ben Attow) was our first essay. This mountain has an eastern top, a central summit (3,385 feet), from which a ridge dips down to Lochan a' Bhealach; then there is a western ridge—a range of fretted pinnacles which we did not approach closely. Between the eastern elevation and the summit a numerous family of sea-pinks drew

sustenance from an unpromising-looking soil. It seemed strange to find flourishing on a mountain-top a plant which one has always associated with the sea-shore.* The outlook was far-flung and varied, and involuntarily these words of Professor Blackie's hymn rose to my lips:—

Rock and highland,
Wood and island,
Crag where eagles proud have soared,
Mighty mountains purple-breasted

Loch Duich showed a glimpse of itself as an ebon pool in a hollow far beneath. There was a glint of the western sea with peaks of the Coolin rising phantom-like from its silvery gleam. Ben Nevis and his eastern rivals, the Cairngorms, were in full view, and all the intervening high tops and woods and valleys. Wave upon wave of hills appeared, with cloud shadows chasing the sunlight over them. Deep dark glens also, and lochs that flashed back the challenge of the sun from their golden depths, or sulked, black as Erebus, in gloomy recesses. I thought with map and compass to identify some of the heights, but philosophic G. said:—“Put by your map. Let us look around and rejoice, but let us not dim our pleasure in the hopeless task of identification. As well might we try to identify the waves on the ocean during a November storm. Leave that task to the pedants who study maps but do not travel, who weigh the hills but do not climb them.” So we spent half-an-hour, gloriously lazy, stretched on the sand beside the cairn, caressed by the sun and the pleasant mountain winds.

Across the valley Sgurr nan Ceathreamhnan towered high, austere, sublime, magnificent. The pronunciation of the name of this mountain is a task not lightly to be undertaken by one bred to the Saxon tongue, but a free translation would give “The Peak of the Quarters.”

* Dr. Hugh Macmillan, in his “Holidays in High Land,” cites the occurrence of sea-pinks on mountain tops as one of the proofs that our mountain ranges were once islands in the midst of an extensive sea. The scurvy pass, *Cochlearia Greenlandica*, is another survivor of the ancient maritime flora.—EDITOR.

We essayed to ascend it next. The real magnitude of this second ascent, however, was not apparent till after we had toiled over the big, broad shoulder which abuts from the peak. A ridge falling steeply away on either side in cliff and scree impinges upon the shoulder, and to reach it one must descend some 20 feet of a steep rock face. Then the climber finds himself on a narrow way which he must traverse if he would gain the summit (3,770 feet). The sgor is one of seven tops over 3,500 feet high in the range of mountains which separates Glen Affric from Glen Cannich and culminates in Carn Eighe.

We broke camp next morning, and by Glen Grivie, Loch a' Bhealach, and an awesome defile cleft between Ben Attow and A' Ghlas Bhenn, made our way to Loch Duich, and so to Glen Shiel. The usual route is by Glen Lichd, and it is through this glen, I understand, that it is intended to bring the proposed new highway from Beauly to Invershiel. In Glen Shiel, although it is traversed by a first-class road, an atmosphere of remoteness seems to brood. There one feels more lonely than in Glen Affric. The latter is spacious and light-some; Glen Shiel is sombre and confined, its mountains magnificent but menacing—"mountain gloom and mountain glory." As in Glen Affric, we were fortunate in our camping pitch, and the kindness of the good folks in the cottage near Shiel Bridge contributed much to the pleasure of our venture. Nor will we soon forget the wise old collie who approved of us and appointed himself our sentry for the night. Fain would we have lingered by the singing waters of Shiel. Sgur Ouran and Garve Leach, from their lofty heights, tossed down challenges to us, and our friends extended a tempting invitation to prolong our stay. But the sands of our little time of freedom were running out; and thus it was that, late the following night, hungry and fatigued, we encamped in an enchanted glade amidst a wood on the banks of Loch Garry. A strenuous journey under a broiling sun brought us over the ridge

from Glen Clunie to Glen Loyne, that eerie place across whose dismal swamps in the darkening wander the uncanny lights. But here in our faery forest the night was cool and pleasant; and after supper we sat awhile looking from the door of our tent, which opened on a forest aisle, golden-flecked with the mystery and charm of the moonlight amongst the trees. At the end of the aisle lay the sleeping loch, and beyond Ben Teigh, lofty and remote, a delicate garment of filmy cloud about his shoulders—a mountain of dreamland.

Two days passed, and we were back again in Inverness, having completed the later stages of our journey by way of Loch Oich, Fort Augustus, Strath Errick, and Drumashie Moor.

And now our sojourn through that magnificent country lives only as a happy memory, the more delicious, perhaps, that occasionally, even amidst the soul-destroying fret and clamour of the city, golden glimpses flit before our vision of calm blue lochs, grey rocks with clinging patches of purple heath, emerald turf, forests and golden mists, spacious moorlands, and mountain peaks, lofty and austere against the evening sky, or sublime and terrible with the thunder-clouds massed around them. Ethereal visions these, distilled essence of days lived to the full amongst the elemental things.