

MIDWINTER IN THE LAIRIG DHRU:
A STRENUOUS CROSSING FROM SPEY TO DEE.

BY ROBERT CLARKE.

NEW YEAR MEETS of the Club have formed distinctive and successful features of its activities of recent years. The venue has usually been Ballater or Braemar, from whence the mountains in these localities have been climbed under more or less wintry conditions. So far as I am aware, the crossing of the Cairngorm range by way of the Làirig Dhrù has not as yet figured among the Club's winter expeditions; and as I walked through the pass from Aviemore to Luibeg on the 1st. of January this year, perhaps the following "plain tale from the hills" may prove an incentive—or a warning!—to some of the keen and youthful "stalwarts" who nowadays form a fair proportion of the Club's membership. Of one thing they may rest assured—they will not meet me in the course of their outing; the wildest of wild horses will fail to drag me to repeat the performance.

On a fine day, with a clear sky above and the snow hardened by wind and frost, the Làirig would doubtless make an ideal winter walk, but I rather fear its fine days are few and far between. The day I selected was certainly not one of them, and though up to a point the outing was quite interesting, and had even its great moments, the recollection of four hours' walking among soft and melting snow and three hours' floundering in a wild Highland glen in the darkness of a January night induces me to say, for myself at least, "Never again, never again!"

I arrived at Aviemore on the last day of the year, to find the Spey in great flood as the result of a heavy

rainfall and the sudden melting of half a foot of snow that had fallen two days previously. The afternoon was devoted to a walk to Coylum Bridge and up through the Rothiemurchus Forest to a point about three miles above the Club's footbridge over the Allt Beinne. From here I had a good view up the pass, and was quite satisfied with what I saw. The lower parts were comparatively clear of snow, and though the upper reaches were pure white, I had every reason to think that at that altitude the temperature would be sufficiently low to make the snow firm enough to support one's weight. In the late afternoon I sauntered back through the forest, amid a glorious burst of sunshine, which seemed to promise well for the morrow's outing.

Like every other self-respecting community, Aviemore throws itself heart and soul into the ceremony of "first-footing," and this was reflected in a "sleep-in" on the part of my temporary hostess, with a consequent start on my part at 8.45 a.m., instead of 8 a.m. as I had intended. These lost 45 minutes would at the end of that eventful day have been worth their weight—if time could be weighed—in the purest of gold. It had rained heavily overnight, and the Cairngorms were only dimly visible as I stepped out briskly on the road to Coylum Bridge. My pass was, however, well in view, and I pushed up through the forest hoping the clouds on the high hills would lift. The footbridge was reached in about half-an-hour less than the time allowed. The Beinne was in even greater flood than on the previous day, and the path among the rank heather was very wet and muddy, the aftermath of the recently-melted snow. Carn Elrick and Castle Hill, at the mouth of the pass, were almost all black, but Ben Muich Dhui and Braeriach carried great snow-fields on their broad shoulders. Their tops were hidden in the clouds. Just as I entered the pass proper a fine rain began to fall, and I decided that if it persisted and got heavier I would turn back. It did not last long, however, and, though there were slight renewals of the downpour in the

course of the day, no inconvenience or discomfort was experienced from them. The strong west wind, too, was in my favour, for it followed me right through the pass.

A couple of hours' steady walking brought me abreast of Creag na Leacainn, and it was at this point that I struck the snow. For some time previous it had been intermittent on the path, but from now onward it held complete possession everywhere. It was about two feet deep, and it was soft and yielding, and one had to walk very warily on the broken ground hereabouts. As a consequence, the pace had perforce to be slowed down considerably. It's dogged as does it, however, and I slowly made my way past the Lurcher's Crag, up the steep sides of which several stags bounded at my approach. These and several flocks of ptarmigan, in their pure white winter plumage, were the only living creatures I saw during the whole outing.

My original programme had included the climbing of Ben Muich Dhui from about this point, but I had lost so much time among the snow, and the top of the mountain was still cloud-capped besides, that I gave up the idea without more ado. Eventually, the notorious boulders that fill the pass for more than a mile near the top were reached. I expected trouble from them, and I got it—and lots of it. The snow, despite the altitude which I had now reached, about 2,600 feet, remained as soft and unreliable as lower down, and every other step I took I broke through this covering, and my legs, and sometimes most of my body too, went down between the big boulders. A serious accident might easily have happened at this point, and great care had to be exercised. Fortunately, I had taken a walking-stick with me, and this proved invaluable in "sounding" doubtful spots, and in being used as a prop against which one leant in pulling oneself out of specially deep abysses.

Everything has an end, even the Làirig boulders, and I hailed the first of the Pools of Dee, at the summit of

the pass, with unfeigned joy. Looking Speyward, there was no view, heavy clouds having blotted out everything in that direction. The time-table on the Beinne foot-bridge gives the time from that point to the spot where I now stood as three hours, and I had taken four and a half. Another half-hour was consumed in making my way from the north to the south end of the summit past the various pools—there were no fewer than five that day (all apparently recently frozen, though now free of ice), while a year ago, in June, only two were visible. The most southerly, and the largest, commands a view down Glen Dee, and I was absolutely staggered to find, when I reached that point, that there was an unbroken sheet of white extending thence for about two miles down the glen, over—or through—which I had to make my way. I knew that the earlier snow had for the most part come from the north, but I was now to find that there had been southerly storms in the beginning and middle of December, which had packed the snow into the head of Glen Dee to a considerable depth. I had never bargained for this, and had expected that, the Pools once reached, I would have no further trouble with snow.

Previous to leaving Aberdeen, a Fleet Street friend had gifted me some of the wine of the country, and before starting the descent I drank his health from my flask. Surely never will that conventional Cockney's prosperity be pledged under wilder or more awe-inspiring surroundings. The steep, almost precipitous sides of Braeriach and Ben Muich Dhui rose on either hand, while further down the glen Cairn Toul and the Devil's Point, the snow stretching in broad bands from base to summit, and their steep black cliffs standing out in sharp contrast, made a never-to-be-forgotten picture. The utter desolation and loneliness of the scene was thrilling even to a hardened mountaineer, and one had the feeling that the only thing lacking to complete the picture was the presence of the fabled Ferla Mhor himself!

It was now 3 p.m., and it behoved me to be again on the move, for I was still about nine miles from my destination, and I had those two miles of snow to negotiate. Keeping the left bank of the stream which issues from the Pools, I plunged boldly into the snowfield, and for over an hour I had some of the most toilsome exercise in which it was ever my lot to indulge. At every step I sank at least knee-deep, and very often waist-deep, among the yielding and fast-melting mass, and the strain on the leg muscles was tremendous. As a pleasing variant to this, I welcomed the fording of the many streams that were tumbling, at a very acute angle, down the mountain side every hundred yards or so. These varied in depth from a foot to at least a yard, and one of them, the Tailor's Burn, a short distance below where the snowfield ended, almost succeeded in hurling me neck and crop into its boulder-strewn bed. The number and volume of these streams showed that even at the very highest altitudes the recent sharp rise in the temperature was taking its toll of the summit snows. It was only now that one realised the uses of the numerous scars that disfigure the mountain sides in summer. It is a moderate estimate to say that from the Pools of Dee to the Luibeg footbridge I crossed—which of course means waded through—at least 50 streams, all "going strong," while in summer I can recall a bare half-dozen, and only two of these really worth the name.

There was certainly a sound of many waters in the glen that afternoon. From the great gut of the Garbhchoire the Dee was thundering down in tremendous volume, while from each of the three great corries of Cairn Toul facing Glen Dee a roaring cataract was precipitating itself, that from the Saucer Corrie, just below the summit, being a magnificent spectacle of 1,500 feet of almost sheer waterfall. Looking backward up the glen in the dim half-light of that winter afternoon one realised as never before the absolute savagery of the scene. Glen Dee in summer can be majestic, and wild

and stern, and still withal beautiful, but here was nothing but Nature in her grimmest and most repellent mood—relentless, aloof. No mercy need be looked for should one be caught in a storm amid this inhospitable solitude; the struggle could be but a short one, and have only one result.

The snowfields past, and the path gained, I put forth my best efforts to at least get clear of Glen Dee ere night set in. Dusk was falling as I passed the Corrou Bothy, surely one of the loneliest spots for a man to have resided at for three months every year, as used to be the case. Opposite Glen Geusachan, where the path rises over a low shoulder of Carn a Mhaim, to strike into Glen Luibeg, it was all but dark; but I was able to follow it by the glancing of the pools of water lying in its bed. A few minutes afterwards the light suddenly improved, and on looking behind my eyes were gladdened to behold the silver sickle of the new moon sailing among the clouds above Ben Bhrotain and transfiguring the gloom of Glen Geusachan into a fairyland. Luna's assistance did not last more than about ten minutes, however, for she was again swallowed up among the clouds. Night had now fallen with a vengeance, and it was lucky for me that the path over Carn a Mhaim is very well marked. To the point where it dips down to the Luibeg footbridge I followed it without much difficulty. There I intentionally diverged, knowing that from thence it passes over and among a series of flat sharp-edged boulders, whose acquaintance in the dark, and unexpectedly, I did not wish to make. Bearing away slightly to the left, I cautiously felt my way down the somewhat uneven slope, and though I stumbled and fell several times, I gained the bottom of the glen about 100 yards above the footbridge, which took me clear of the 20 feet almost perpendicular bank down which the path comes.

As I crossed the footbridge I found the Luibeg in equal flood with its Glen Dee brethren. I had thought that, this point gained, my troubles were all past, and I

would easily follow the path and reach Luibeg in little over half-an-hour. As events turned out, it took me exactly two hours to cover the two miles or less that separate the two points. Let no man be puffed up with the idea that he knows the features of a countryside and that he could easily find his way there in darkness. There are few persons, excepting stalkers, I daresay, who know Glen Luibeg better than I do. I have walked it morning, noon, and night, in the summer and autumn months for the past thirty-two years, and I flattered myself that even though I did miss the path in darkness at any point, I would have little difficulty in shortly regaining it. As I write, I can mentally visualise every twist and turning of its course. As a matter of fact, however, I had not gone more than 20 yards from the footbridge when I was at fault, and during the next two hours I wandered down the glen completely at sea as to where I exactly was. My only guide in an otherwise uncharted ocean was the very faint outline of the top part of the steep hill behind the house at Luibeg. If I did not meet the path in that two hours' stroll, however, I made the acquaintance of the majority of the boulders, bogs and burns that have their habitation in the glen, and I consider myself specially fortunate in not having received serious injury in some of the involuntary descents I made into the deep hollows and beds of streams. The prostrate pines were specially eager to give me welcome, and invariably succeeded in bringing me down to their own level! One "lad" among them, more daring or crafty than his fellows, actually back-heeled me with a neatness and completeness that would have secured his instant dismissal to the pavilion had an impartial referee been on the field!

It is ever the unexpected that happens! Just as I had begun to wonder if there ever had been such a thing as a path in the glen, and whether my punishment for my many sins was to wander thus at the sport of chance till the end of time, my foot caught the edge of a slight trench in the ground, and to my great surprise and joy

I found myself on the path again, and that within a couple of hundred yards of my destination. My reception there by Mr. and Mrs. McDonald—after an outing lasting eleven and a quarter hours—was of the heartiest and kindest possible description. My clothes were soaked through, and even the contents of my rucksack had not escaped the effects of the numerous baptisms to which I had been subjected. Soon, however, I was arrayed in dry raiment belonging to "Sandy," and partaking of a splendid supper, to which I did every justice. Mrs. McDonald must have sat up half the night drying my soddened clothes; and nothing was left awaiting on the part of my kind host and hostess to make me forget the many discomforts through which I had passed in the very first "first-footing" expedition of my life!