

A SUNNY WEEK-END IN THE CAIRNGORMS.

BY GEORGE R. SMITH.

WITH the long week-end of the Aberdeen Summer Holiday before us, and a promised continuance of fine weather, to go a-hiking into the hills seemed for three keen trampers perhaps the only naturally possible, or shall I say allowable, thing to do. So it was that we found ourselves on the Saturday afternoon train for Boat of Garten, all prepared to make the most of the few days.

By strange chance we made acquaintance with other two climbers on the train, so one can imagine that the rail journey proved rather a pleasant beginning—five heads over a map, and that fine book on the Cairngorms, by Alexander, and any journey could be a pleasure.

After the best part of three hours in a train, to tramp along in the open was most refreshing, even though the sun was rather hot and we each carried a hefty pack. We were, of course, bound for the Cairngorms, our object being to climb Cairngorm itself, then make for the Shelter Stone that night; so, guided by our map, we left the familiar Aviemore road and struck up An Slugan Glen. We were now on strange ground, and on such a perfect afternoon everything was seen at its best, as if seeking to give us on our first venture on this side of the great mountain group a special welcome. The going being very easy, every minute was a pleasure, and we were in the proper mood to enjoy most fully the varied beauties of this wonderful glen. Then when the valley opened came the magnificent panorama of the Cairngorms, and we agreed that the view here presented was certainly one of the finest in Scotland. Tempted to linger here, we sprawled on the heather, picnicking, and lazily resting after the warmth of the afternoon. Here was complete contentment. We had chosen a spot where the now weakening

sun could shine on us through a clearing in the trees. Everything was at its loveliest; the heather beginning to show its finest colourings and contrasting so charmingly with the greys and silver of stones and young branches. Tall trees close at hand invited our admiration, but our eyes ever returned to view the far, yet seemingly near hills, for the late afternoon sunshine kindly brought out each detail with splendid clearness.

While we were thus enjoying the scene and forgetting that we had a long way to tramp before night, our friends of the train, who had been visiting at Boat of Garten, came upon us. They accompanied us on the road as far as Loch Morlich, where we parted, our friends making for the Rothiemurchus Forest, where they were to rest before tackling Braeriach in the early morning. The next part of our road skirted the beautiful shore of the loch, then reaching Glenmore Lodge, we took the winding path through the trees, following the Allt More. Rewarded at every turn by the charm of new and delightful scenery, we pushed on, and although the walking was very easy, and we regretted that time did not allow of our dallying, we were almost glad to leave the last few trees and get to the open of the lower slopes of Cairngorm, for the shelter of the trees had begun to make things rather oppressive.

Making good progress, we could afford now and then to turn around and view the surrounding country, which, now that the sun had gone, was slipping into a loom of mystery. Far to the north we could trace the way we had come since afternoon, right down to the fine picture of the silent loch.

Thinking to make a straight line for the top of Cairngorm we foolishly left the path, a course of procedure that we soon regretted, for we encountered some very stony stretches that proved rather laborious, coming at the end of a day's programme. As we neared the top, a bitter wind blowing with us obliged us to don our extra wraps, for the cold now became intense, and as if daring our coming and sometimes threatening to engulf Cairngorm itself, a rolling mist guarded the approach to Braeriach.

It wanted but a few minutes to half-past ten when we

reached the cairn, and here in the softly diffused twilight we forgot the coldness and the late hour in endeavouring to pick out the more familiar outlines to the south and east. Formidable clouds had piled up from the west, casting a deep gloom over most of the country north of the cairn, yet allowing enough light to filter through to delight us with magic reflections from distant lochs. Here was night as it were asleep with one eye open. Far away beyond the hills the Culbin Sands returned a faint glimmer, creating the impression of a fantastic morning about to break in the north. But we had no doubt that this was only a little joke from His Solar Majesty, for the eastern horizon gave promise of a sunrise still a few hours distant.

Abandoning our idea of attempting the Shelter Stone that night, we descended a few hundred yards to the sheltered south of the cairn, and in a few minutes had erected our bivouac behind a huge boulder, bringing into use our walking-sticks, for, wishing to travel as light as possible, we had come without poles of any kind. Of the three J. was the only one who had taken a blanket. W. and I having extra overcoats, we piled all on top and huddled together. It will be appreciated by anyone that this, our first night passed nestling in the heart of the Cairngorms was an experience, the adventurous thought of which might keep one awake. At anyrate there was little, if any, sleep, only a fitful passing of the cold hours, a nightmare of discomfort and flapping canvas, yet not altogether unpleasant. I felt a bit sorry for our tent next morning. It did appear so dejected after the stiff breeze of the night-time. Viewed from without it seemed incredible that such a pathetic looking affair could have housed us so well. Crawling out into the morning about eight o'clock, the warm sunshine soon put new life into us, and after a splash at the source of the Coire Raibiart, followed by a breakfast worthy of the occasion, we lay completely happy in admiring the morning sunshine on the hills.

Somewhere between nine and ten o'clock we started on the trek again, feeling very fit, and making for the Larig Ghru and Braeriach. On such a fine morning everything

seemed so easy that we mapped out a programme that embraced Braeriach and Cairn Toul, and a return over Ben Macdhuì. With excellent visibility the tops showed up with remarkable clearness, even to the far-distant Benachie. Cairn Toul and Braeriach seemed particularly tempting, Ben Macdhuì appearing rather tame, I thought, when I recalled that but a fortnight before we had scrambled to the top on one of those winter days that prowl about the Cairngorms even in summer time. A little to the north of the March Burn we began our descent into the Larig, after scouting around for a suitable bit where we could scramble down. From being great fun it developed into something quite strenuous, for we had chosen a rather nasty place and had to spread out to escape the loose rocks and stones that we, despite care, sent careering down into the pass. The now broiling sun added to our discomfort, and there was a time when I almost wished that we had tackled something less tiring. Things became so exciting that I thought it best to rid myself of my heavy rucksack. This happened when I became stuck in a rather awkward position on some rocks, and for a moment had a funny feeling that I would fall right on to Braeriach! With a shout to W., who was leading, I dropped my rucksack, expecting to retrieve it a little further on; but we were not prepared for what happened next. Away it bolted like some live thing, bounding from rock to rock, gathering momentum as it went, and causing a small avalanche of stones in its wake. Fascinated, we stared after the ridiculous thing until distance made it impossible for us to see its further progress. Eventually we reached the bottom just twenty minutes before J., who had made slow progress, being somewhat handicapped with his light shoes. Meanwhile I had recovered my run-away rucksack, and as it contained most of the foodstuffs, we enjoyed quite a novel fruit salad, thanks to the pounding that the contents had undergone.

My companions had done the Larig on another memorable trip, though this was my first jaunt this way, and realizing that to start climbing again with our heavy loads was no joke in the inexorable afternoon sunshine, we agreed

to push on for Derry Lodge. No records were broken, for we frequently enjoyed a sun-bath by way of refreshment, besides meeting numerous parties making for Aviemore.

The vicinity of Derry Lodge, which we reached about six o'clock, presented quite an unusual aspect that evening, for all around were many parties of returned climbers, camping and busily engaged in preparing tea. Here we met our two friends, not long since arrived, who told us of an unexciting cold night spent in sleeping-bags, followed by a glorious day on Braeriach. After the scorching hours of the afternoon, the thought of slipping on our bathing-suits and giving ourselves a cooler in the waters of the Derry was irresistible, though the performance of which ceremony was scarcely necessary to sharpen our appetites for the attack on the provisions that followed.

A glance at our map had suggested that to follow the Derry, doing the Larig an Laoigh, and so down the Avon, offered a walk that promised to be interestingly new to us, and moreover would not oblige us to do anything in the way of climbing, for we wished to avoid anything strenuous if the prevailing weather conditions should continue. With still a few hours of the summer evening light, we decided to make for the Avon before darkness came, all of us being in good form now that the cool evening had come. We were soon well on our way, meeting returning rambles now and then, even after we had passed the lure of the trees of Glen Derry. Shortly after leaving the Derry, we lost the track for a bit, which meant a jolly scramble over deep heather until, from the top of the Pass we sighted a rough path following the burn on the other side. I think that we did our descent to the fords at, perhaps, the best time possible for feeling the grand remoteness of the Pass, for with the coming of the night the impressive wildness of everything was, if anything, accentuated, giving us a memory that will more than linger.

Reaching the Avon when failing light was beginning to make the going less pleasant, we hunted around attempting to ford the river by means of stepping stones, but finding this hopeless, there was nothing else for it but that we should

wade across—quite a thrill at this late hour! It was fortunate that we were well supplied with ground-sheets, for, after a vain searching and prodding for a dry place, we were obliged, while there was still a little light, to erect the tent on a spot which, if a little more than damp, gave us the shelter of a big rock. That menacing, rolling mist-cloud of last night had returned, having taken up its quarters beyond Loch Avon, and trailing a shroud over Cairngorm. This failed to damp our spirits, however, for by now we had absolute faith in the weather, though for the sake of comfort we took care that the erection of our tent was, to-night, more of a success. Every man for himself! We dressed for the occasion, even to gloves, caps, and extra coats, I keeping on my heavy boots, while J. looked especially ridiculous rolled in his blanket. After the ordeal of crossing the river, I had treated myself to a lemon, followed by a cigarette, but this didn't prove a very efficient night-cap; nor had I become skilled in the art of making a rucksack do service as a pillow, for my extra shoes still felt a bit hard! And tramping in shorts may be the thing for the daytime, but lying during a cold night inside a tent makes one wonder! Though to many it may seem anything but fun our lying out there in such a wild place, somehow I felt that this was the real way to do the hills. This was a taste of the adventure we all dream about in our early days.

After a futile attempt to make up lost sleep I sat up to await the coming light, and shortly after half-past three we crept out, packed up everything, and set off to meet the sunrise. A few minutes on the heather soon took the stiffness and the wrinkles from us. A morning when we could imagine ourselves to be exploring a new world, I was not really pleased when we struck the path that leads close to the Avon, though, after an hour or so, I had a grateful thought for those who had first made the trail. The magnificent picture when the sun first touched the mountain tops was something to remember. Many times we paused to admire the wonder of the morning sunshine, and then after a long stretch in the shadows it was glorious coming into the warm rays.

Now and then we sighted deer, taking one herd by surprise when we rounded the spur of a hill. No doubt the animals had come down to drink, and there was a bit of a stampede when they sensed us, all climbing to a safe distance, from which they regarded us, as if wondering what strange creatures we were and how dared we disturb their peace at this early hour. Two of the herd were unable to join the others, one of them crossing the river and making strange barking sounds to its mate, which, being without antlers, we thought might be a young deer. This one had hidden in deep heather, only a few feet from the path, and when we came alongside we were tempted to tickle its ears with our sticks, for the young brute was showing the top of its head amid the heather. But we had caused quite enough excitement already, and, besides, had no wish that the whole herd should come down upon us; so, when we had gone a few yards beyond the hiding place, we turned to see the young deer bounding across the river to join the other, when they speeded up the hill together, pausing now and then to look back upon us.

The sun had it all to himself this morning, for there was no mist, and with the fast-going early hours came increased warmth, so that our journey down the Avon was punctuated with short rests, during which we added weight to our packs by discarding our now unneeded extra clothes. Although everywhere there were magnificent opportunities for photography, we didn't bemoan the lack of our cameras, which, strangely enough, we had forgotten to bring with us. This felt like a day with no regrets, and feeling gloriously alive, we were content to enjoy the wonders of the Avon valley and to think of the possibilities of similar treks offered by this part of the country.

It was about half-past eight when W. suggested a dip in the river—rather a good idea we thought, now that we were warmed up. We found the Avon this morning much colder than the Derry was the previous evening.

Still, this merely refreshed us for another spell along the path. However, as we had been going fairly steadily for more than four hours, we decided to breakfast here, after which we spent a lazy hour lying by the river.

But time was slipping and we had to get over quite a bit of country to catch our afternoon bus, and once on the way again we stepped out with more speed, taking turns at setting the pace. The whole aspect of the country had changed since our early morning start. Well behind now were the three and four thousanders, and wild grandeur had given place to the less imposing hills.

As we neared the Linn of Avon the slight incline and the now scorching sun again gave us to think that we were wise in avoiding any climbing. Yet by the time we had reached Inchrorry with not a breath of cool air about, there were longings for a breeze from a hill-top to make things more pleasant.

The last part of our tramp to the Cock Bridge was, perhaps, the least enjoyable of the whole trip, not because of lack of interest, but that the terrific heat of the sun made our forced march rather uncomfortable, sometimes almost an ordeal. With the lesser hills had come flocks of sheep taking the place of deer. There were still the lonely miles of hills, but the remoteness had gone and now had come the comfortable-looking undulating stretches.

However, the Cock Bridge was reached just on one o'clock, and we were delighted when informed that we had an hour and twenty minutes before our bus started. This, of course, meant another dip, in the Don this time, a luxurious splashing in the cool water until our driver hailed us on time to start. He was only going to Bellabeg, and would leave in the evening for Aberdeen, which arrangement suited us admirably, for we were in no hurry to leave the hills. We felt so refreshed that, on getting off the bus, we very nearly started off to walk to Alford. But the Don won! Another splash in the river, then we had our second meal for the day, a four o'clock picnic by the river bank. Then followed an afternoon in the sun, and after those two nights of sleeplessness it cannot be wondered at that there was some attempt to make up arrears of sleep, for we all three dozed off for an hour—or so!

At 6 p.m. we bade good-bye to Strathdon, but not to the hills, for the magnificent evening made the journey

home a fitting finish to our adventures, and as this was only our second glimpse of the upper Donside hills, we saw much to delight us, with not even a thought of those missing photographs. But I now begin to have regrets that we omitted our cameras, yet there also comes the thought of another little adventure that will, perhaps, take us on a return journey over the same ground, when we hope that the sun will again take his part in the repeat performance.