

## THE SHELTER STONE IN NOVEMBER.

BY JAMES SCRIMGEOUR.

LOCH AVON and The Shelter Stone! There is a glamour about the very names for all lovers of the Cairngorms. Remote and difficult of access even in the long days of summer, the difficulty of their approach is doubled and even trebled when the short, dark days of November are with us. But that Shelter Stone must surely be impregnated with super-magnetic power when at such a time of year it can draw from their warm firesides five heads of households who apparently laugh at the nonsense about "Too old at Forty" or even "Too old at Fifty."

Behold then these five worthies setting out for Braemar the "day before" so as to ensure an early start for the "Expotition"—as Christopher Robin would call it. "Geordie," our "Shuvver," is a cheery soul and enlivens the journey with his army experiences while we are proceeding up the Cairnwell and over the Elbow. Past Persey the distant hills are seen to be snow-clad, and in half an hour we are right in amongst them—with a fringe of snow on the road side. We arrive at Braemar and receive a warm welcome from "Mine Host," having the hotel practically to ourselves. A short walk in the dark after tea to stretch our legs—dinner, and then early to bed, for it's "early to rise" the next day. Not, however, before giving careful instructions for the morrow's provender. A thermos flask of tea for each (*eight* sugar knots in some of them) and sandwiches. Three demand jam sandwiches and biscuits and cheese, and the other two meat sandwiches, but on second thoughts the "meaty members" demand jam ones in addition!

A knock at the bedroom door—Five o'clock on a dark, dismal, rainy November morning—

Truly bed in such a case  
Seems a comfortable place.

However there must be no funking it, so up we jump and get suitably toggled for the occasion. Breakfast at half-past five, provender packed into haversacks or pockets, and the cheery face of Geordie at the door to lure us out into the darkness for the ten miles' drive to Derry Lodge. We set off at the back of six, up that narrow twisting road past Inverey and the Linn of Dee, but we have it all to ourselves at that unearthly hour, save for innumerable rabbits and a couple of deer who skip leisurely across the road out of the glare of our advancing headlights.

The Derry Lodge "Sentry" now being withdrawn for the season, we get right up to the door of Derry Lodge—another name of memories for Cairngorm lovers, and, carefully instructing Geordie to be back at three o'clock for us, we set out on the walk proper at 7 o'clock sharp, in light quite sufficient for our comfort. The road is not the more familiar Larig Ghru route, but strikes sharp north from the Lodge up Glen Derry, following the Derry Burn, first through the remains of an ancient Scots pine forest, and then out into the open glen. At this point the clouds broke, blue sky appeared, the sun lit up the snow-clad bordering peaks, and for a brief space we really had visions of a fine day. But it was not to be, and we had intermittent showers all the rest of the way. In less than two hours we were right in amongst the snow and soon we were struggling up the wild Coire Etchachan in snow that was often knee deep and sometimes thigh deep. Before we got to the top we were in fairly thick rain—at times sleet and snow—and visibility became very poor. Maps and compasses were consulted, and conditions generally looked so bad that for a space there was doubt in the minds of some as to whether we could strike a reasonably safe course down the dangerously steep descent to Loch Avon. Our leader got muttered warnings of "Shot at dawn," and such-like, but with supreme confidence in his map and compass he gave us a line and we set out again, passing on our left Loch Etchachan (3,058 feet),

the highest loch of its size in the country—unfortunately shrouded in mist. This point was reached about ten o'clock, after three hours' strenuous walking and climbing. Soon the really ticklish part of the journey began—a 700 feet nearly sheer descent to Loch Avon over a mighty confusion of boulders thickly embedded in snow. This was a regular scramble—often on all fours—but in some ways the snow was a friendly enemy providing, as it did, a cushion against scraped shins and the like. By good luck we struck the track of a solitary deer, and that "rock expert" undoubtedly helped us down, but we were mainly indebted to our own guide for a safe journey down that awesome place. The famous Shelter Stone was reached about 10.30, and we had half an hour's rest for lunch. The Visitors' Books were unearthed—they are carefully preserved in a tin box, or to be more correct, in two biscuit boxes telescoped into one another—and the names of the party were duly inscribed and dated. We were very "bucked" to find that for the past three years at least there were no later entries than September, so we felt we had the honour of establishing a record of a kind.

We then set out on another very rough journey along the marge of that wonderful Loch Avon, majestic in its very desolation. The Scottish Mountaineering Club Guide describes it as the grandest loch in the Scottish Highlands, and its only possible superior is Coruisk in Skye. Mist on the tops again baffled our hopes of seeing its surroundings at their best, but it was at least clear lower down and the sight was wonderful. Those who had seen the place without snow pointed out that the snow softened the ruggedness of the scene, and that in some respects the summer aspect was the wilder. However, it was wild enough in all conscience. As we looked along the Loch we were entranced by a wonderful ethereal blue light playing over the snow at the far end of the Loch, caused presumably by sunshine above the snow. We struggled along the rocky shore—the loch is nearly a mile long—round Ben Vane (that extraordinary Gaelic language spells Vane as Mheadhoin), until passing the Dubh Lochan we strike the Larig an Laoigh.

It is certainly not much of a path, even for calves (which presumably give it its name), far less human beings, but such as it was, we were glad to see it and we made more rapid progress than we had done for the past three or four hours. We soon after came in sight of Glen Derry again, at the point where we climbed up the Coire Etchachan, halted for a few minutes to drain our thermos flasks to the last drop, and then set out on the last four miles of our tramp, which ended at Derry Lodge at three o'clock, according to plan, and were delighted to find the faithful Geordie awaiting us. It should be explained that the whole "expedition" had been most carefully "time tabled" by our leader, as we had to get from Braemar to Dundee in time to catch the last boat for Newport at 8.15. This we duly did, having in the meantime motored to Braemar, visited our hotel, changed our boots and nether garments (whose condition by this time was indescribable), got a substantial meal, and motored in the dark down the long winding Cairnwell Road. This ended a memorable day for all concerned. On a rough computation the tramp, which lasted from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m., with three-quarters of an hour off, had measured well on for 20 miles of very rough going, nearly two-thirds of it being more or less through soft snow. Yet, so exhilarating was the air, and so high were the spirits, that no one was more than pleasantly tired at the end of the day.