

## A DAFT DAY.

By HUGH D. WELSH and IAN M. ROBERTSON.

OWING to its being of comparatively easy access, Lochnagar is perhaps the most frequently climbed mountain on Deeside. Usually the ascent is by the recognised foot-paths during the summer months, when long daylight and comparatively favourable weather conditions prevail. Numerous ascents are also made by the various gullies, chimneys, and buttresses which are features of the "steep frowning glories" of the northern and eastern aspects of the mountain, and provide all the thrills of rock climbing. Climbs under winter conditions, however, are no doubt undertaken but are infrequently recorded, so that an account of one by way of the Ballochbuie Forest may be of some interest to those who have not experienced the joys of an ascent of this landmark in deep snow. It was by this route that Byron, when a boy of fifteen, made the ascent.

The party numbered three, the writers and J. M. Shewan. In connection with investigations relating to certain soil problems in which we are engaged, samples of the soil from long-undisturbed pine forest were required, and no better place could be thought of than Ballochbuie Forest—"the bonniest plaid in all Scotland"—that remnant of the great Caledonian Forest which once covered the greater part of Scotland.

On Sunday, October 30, 1932, we left Aberdeen by bus at 7.50 a.m., *en route* for Invercauld Bridge, complete with rucksacks loaded with the requisites for soil sampling, and the inevitable adjuncts to a day on the hills. There was low cloud on the higher hills, but there was a promise of better conditions later, as patches of sunlight dappled the brown hillsides here and there. Our ultimate objective, Lochnagar, was cloud hidden, but the hills beyond Ballater were well covered with snow, and we speculated as to what the conditions on the higher levels would be.



About a quarter-to-eleven we stepped off the bus at the gate to the private road leading over the old Bridge of Dee to the Falls of Garbh-Allt. The snow was crisp but deep, and the air refreshing. After a chat with the keeper at the lodge we adjusted our packs and set off for the Garbh-Allt. Snow lay deep all round: the trees were laden. The Forest in summer is beautiful, but under snow it is indescribably so. Small parties of hinds with guardian males broke cover now and again and trotted away through the undergrowth. The intense stillness was broken now and again by the hoarse bellowing of challenging stags, but we did not see any signs of combat. Just below the Falls we struck off to the right into the Forest, ploughing knee-deep in the snow-covered heather and blaeberreries. Below the largest and thickest firs the snow did not lie so deeply, and here were dug out the soil samples we required. By now the air had become warmer, and a constant drip of water, with now and again a lump of soft snow, descended from the snow-laden branches. Rucksacks were packed again, each of us now having an additional load of three fourteen-pound bags well filled with wet soil. The bridge at the Falls was reached about 12.15, but we followed a deer track up the west side of the stream.

The snow was soft and damp, and in the long heather we often sank to well above the knees. In spite of this we had time to enjoy the beauty of what was around us. It was hard going, and we hoped for more comfortable and easier conditions higher up. We followed the Findallacher Burn, crossed it about a mile above the Falls and climbed the steep bank beyond, emerging through stunted firs on a long, flattish ridge between the Findallacher and the Allt Lochan nan Eun. The panorama of snowclad hills to the north and west was gorgeous in a rosy-golden sunshine. The Cairngorm giants supported tumbled masses of stormy-looking cloud, and seemed to soar above the dark tree and heather-clad foothills and valleys. The air was calm and mild: to the west there was glorious sunshine, but eastwards the sky was a mass of dull, leaden cloud, which filled the valley with a sinister, smoky-looking haze cutting out all



view, and giving the nearby snows a peculiar pallid grey appearance.

The crossing of the Allt Lochan nan Eun nearly put a stop to our programme. Ice covered the stones and shelved out below the water. Shewan, losing his foothold on the treacherous surface, fell face down into the water, but was up again immediately. Fortunately he had on his raincoat so that, apart from a soaking from the knees down, he was none the worse.

From this point the slope steepened, the snow lay deeper, and was so soft that progress was slow and laborious. We made the mistake of keeping to the east side of Meall an Tionail, where the snow had drifted over the peat hags: on the west side, which had faced the wind, the snow would have been harder and less deep. However, after considerable effort, we emerged on the col from which rises the long steep slope culminating in Cac Carn Beag. A boulder well up the slope, at about 2,750 feet, was our next objective, an ideal lunch halt and view point. Below us the Sandy Loch (Lochan an Eoin on the older maps) was smothered in snow and ice, and beyond, the black, mirror-like surface of Loch Nan Eun reflected the snow-plastered, mist-capped precipices of The Stuic. (On the older maps this loch is named Loch Dubh, a name that fitted it well on this occasion.) From among the Ballochbuie firs clouds of smoky mist arose, and, carried by sluggish currents, trailed themselves up and over the shoulder to the east of us. The wonderful panorama from west to north was, if anything, more beautiful and awe-inspiring than when seen earlier from lower down. Ben a' Ghlo shouldered up against a clear, yellow radiance, while Cairn Toul, Ben Macdhui, Cairngorm, Ben Avon, and Ben a' Bhuid soared, rosy tinted, into the clouds over wave upon wave of lesser heights. Eastwards the blackness had not lightened: Lochnagar itself was sunless, and a lazily drifting mist obscured the final climb and the tops of the nearby precipices. During our ascent we had remarked upon the numbers of flies and long-legged spiders crawling about on the snow surface. Where had they come from? There was no visible shelter for them, and here we



watched their apparently aimless wanderings around us. Fox tracks had been frequent, and here and there the foxes had dug holes to get to water. The silence was stifling, and a shout from us sounded thin and feeble in the still air, and echoed faintly from the crags behind. Time was hurrying on however, and at 3.15 we were once again on the move upwards.

Those who climb Lochnagar in summer will no doubt recollect what a jumbled pile of boulders the final peak is. The boulders were now for the most part deeply buried, and where their tops had been swept bare of snow, ice had glazed them so that they offered little hand or foot hold. The snow was so treacherous that we broke through continually, and hung suspended by our arms on the surface, feeling about below for something firm to stand on. Our progress was mainly on hands and knees, with an occasional stomach crawl over the glazed rocks. Our heavy rucksacks were an exasperation. At 4.25 the Indicator was reached in a biting wind and a flurry of fine snow. The mist lifted for a few seconds, and the huge cornices over the eastern corrie were revealed to us in the fast failing light. The light was now so far gone that the sooner we were off the hill the better.

It was an easy matter to scramble down in our final upward tracks, till a long slope invited a glissade to the saddle connecting with Meall Coire na Saobhaidhe. The bottom was hidden from us in the darkness, and we were just on the point of pushing ourselves off when a wide crack in the snow ahead was dimly discerned. Closer examination showed a great slab of snow stretching for many yards on either side of us ready to slide off. Skirting this to the left, and looking back and up, we saw that this slab was poised on the brink of a precipitous face of rock. What a narrow escape! The slope below us was now safe, and down we rushed. Hard snow and hail, carried on a bitter wind from the north, now came on, so raincoats were donned, and we set off along the western face of Meall Coire na Saobhaidhe towards Glen Gelder. Darkness was now complete. The going was heavy, soft and deep snow, covered with a tantalising unstable



crust, causing us to flounder and fall headlong time and again. This hill face and that of Creag Liath were crossed, and we were now on the slope overlooking Druim Odhar and Glen Gelder. Gelder Shiel was our next objective.

The snow had now developed into a steady downpour of rain and sleet, and our stumbling progress through the slushy snow across the tangled peat hags of Druim Odhar will not be soon forgotten. The brink of the Gelder was eventually reached at the plantation round the lodge. There was a lot of water running, but we splashed through knee-deep, and at 6.5 reached the road where it entered the plantation. Our going was easier, and it was a relief to have something trustworthy to walk upon, but even so, the trudge down to Easter Balmoral was anything but pleasant. Now and again a pair of green points of light would appear close to us and move slowly to the left. Foxes, no doubt. Away down the glen we could hear the stags bellowing. At 6.45 we entered the woods round Balmoral, where we received some shelter from the rain, and in due course reached the south Deeside road. We considered ourselves very fortunate in getting there so soon, as our bus left Braemar at 7.45 and we had ample time to get it at Crathie. Just as we crossed the Balmoral Bridge at 7.15 a bus went down the Braemar road. We thought it would be a good plan to go up to Crathie Church, sit in the porch, wring out some of the water from our clothes, and have something to eat. This was done, and while rucksacks were being packed again, the lights of a bus were seen coming down from the Braemar direction. Surely this was not our bus already? Shewan ran off to signal it to stop, while we followed at his heels. Just as he got to the gate, shouting, the bus roared past, and we were left gaping at one another! In the heavy rain a time table was examined by the aid of a flashlight, and to our consternation we found that the bus just gone was the last one that night and that there was no mention of one leaving Braemar at 7.45! How had we mistaken the time? There was no help for it but to make for Ballater and hope for a lift in to Aberdeen.

At twenty minutes to eight, therefore, three sodden



figures commenced the eight-mile tramp to Ballater, speculating on the chances of a lift. Walking was mechanical, and several times we had to rouse ourselves as we were on the verge of falling asleep. Near Abergeldie Castle a car came along behind us, and this we stopped. Unfortunately the car was full, so we were left lamenting. Not another car overtook us! The road seemed endless, but at length lights at Foot o' Gairn cheered us as we rounded Windy Corner. By this time we had decided to go up Glen Gairn a mile or so and try a friend there to run us in to Aberdeen. We were pretty tired, and as rain had never ceased we were thoroughly soaked. At the foot of the Gairnshiel road our packs were dumped and Shewan kept vigil over them while we two set off up the rain-filled glen. A peculiar feeling of floating was experienced now that our packs were off our shoulders, and it was difficult to maintain a straight course. Our friends were preparing for bed when we walked in, at 9.50. Hot tea and something to eat soon put us right, and our friend, with great goodwill, got out the car. Away we went, picked up Shewan and the packs, and warmed him up with some food and the contents of a thermos. Aberdeen was reached about 11.45, and very thankful were we to be back. But for our friend we would have had to stay in Ballater. Nevertheless, in spite of the discomfort, we had had a wonderful day—a day we will look back upon with great pleasure.