

A SOLITARY TRAMP.

BY JAMES ALEXANDER.

“φερομεν ἐξ ὀρέων
ἔλικα γεότομον.”—EURIPIDES.

THIS is the tale of a tenderfoot in the Cairngorms. The most humiliating feature of the trip was the discovery of his true status. While the main plan succeeded, our confident mountaineer shed much of his confidence in the process and added to his great respect for the heroes of the game. The trip started by boat from London to Aberdeen, and at 6 P.M. on a fine July evening our tramer started from Braemar. It was a Friday. On his back was his house for the next day or two. The outfit was quite economical in weight, but the proportion of books to food, in terms of consumption, was probably about ten to one. The motor road was bad going, but the scenery of Deeside amply repaid the effort. The first snow showed on Beinn Bhrotain. At the Linn of Dee our pilgrim had his first check. It appeared to him that every second tree bore a notice forbidding fires. A little way up the Lui Beg he decided to take a chance, but before the fire could be got under way some large threatening drops fell. He hurriedly donned his ground-sheet, and decided to carry on after a hasty repast, washed down with the water intended for tea. This was a false alarm, however, and after a mile or two, with the mist closing in, camp was made just off the road. The mist was of the drizzly kind, and the Lui Beg sang its quiet song away on the left. The effort to use the ground-sheet and blanket without getting unduly wet did not conduce to sound sleep, and in the grey of a thick morning the journey was resumed and Derry Lodge passed. A board proclaimed that there lay the Larig Ghru. Visibility was down to about 100 yards, but the burn failed not. A halt by the

wooden footbridge for rest and refreshment, and then on to the foot of Ben Macdhui. Hitherto the burn had been guide, now the gradient took up the job. Lochan Uaine looked its best. This day Dubh Lochan would have been a fitter title, the encircling rocks, especially to the north, looking dark and forbidding. At the level end was a wall of mist, and the whole was a picture to enthral any hill-lover. Farther on he crossed a field of huge granite boulders, such as he had not encountered since the ascent of the middle peak of the Rivals in North Wales. Now ensued the search for the top, which, in the time-honoured way, seemed to recede the farther he advanced. Soon appeared a roofless stone hut and then the cairn. Blessed moment! Past struggles and future labours were ignored. An elaborate indicator, placed there by the Club, named most of the principal hills in Scotland; but, alas, no fair prospect lay before his eyes. A pebble would have reached the bounds of vision. It was close on noon, and an hour showed no improvement in the conditions, so—on to the Shelter Stone.

The map showed this famous spot to be not more than two miles away. Allowing for the hard going, let us say three hours. Actually it took thirty hours. And this is where the Cairngorms claimed their meed of respect. Our tenderfoot's memory holds two outstanding pictures of that afternoon's adventure. One, never to be forgotten, was the golden eagle sitting on a square, mist-encircled rock. Possibly the advent of the lord of creation interrupted his digestion; possibly he was only prospecting for an addition to his meal; whatever the reason, he spread his huge wings and disappeared in the mist, only to alight a few minutes later and resume his meditation. The intruder was ignored and pursued his devious path. Subsequent research and much study of photographs seem to point to the top of the Shelter Stone precipice as the scene of this encounter. The second picture was also in this neighbourhood. The course of one precipitous burn, after traversing a flat floor of red granite, seemed to slide right off the mountain and into the mist. This looked tricky going for a pair of iron-studded boots, minus any adventitious aid in the descent; so, once

more, the wanderer retraced his steps. Among the rocks, here and there, lay melting patches of snow.

Five o'clock found a badly disillusioned enthusiast philosophically looking for a home. Wood and water are regarded as camping necessities. Of water there was a glut. Very good water, too, but you feel at such times that the Sahara would be a pleasant change. Wood did not exist, so tea seemed as far off as ever. Shelter was scant, and was provided by a small overhanging boulder which had obligingly turned its back to the wind and the drizzle. Many long hours of daylight remained, so to pass the time building operations were commenced. All that could be done was to keep the rain out as far as possible. The ground-sheet and blanket were wanted for bed. Nothing remained to make a roof, so our explorer contented himself with building little walls at right angles to this private shelter stone. Then an unexpected difficulty appeared. There was a crack in the stone running back for some 2 feet and piercing the canopy. The water admitted was more annoying than uncomfortable, and defied all efforts at remedy. Stones placed to catch the rain and divert it, earth stuffed in the crack—nothing succeeded. Luckily the wind kept in the same quarter, and the rain was slight and driving, so that presently out came "Sergeant Grischa," and all was peace. The northern nights at this season are short, and it was late by town standards when the light began to fail. There was plenty of food for thought, but the thought that principally engaged the Scottish mind was the question of political boundary. When he had last ascertained his position with certainty, on the top, he was within about a mile of the meeting-place of Banff, Aberdeen, and Inverness. Now he liked to think that he was in his native county, the first, but on the hills all counties look alike. Such considerations, however, cannot worry one for long when there is nobody to argue with! A sluggish but fairly wide stream drifted past the door—save the mark—and search on the map showed that the supposed position of the camp was near the source of many streams; and the streams were as numerous as contour lines. A little distance away

was a pool which might pass for Lochan Buidhe, and then again might not.

Anyway, sleep put an end to all that. Next morning the weather was fairly clear, but the terrain was quite unrecognisable. On a neighbouring hill-side the mist lifted and fell, and nine patches of snow could be counted. It was Sunday, so he decided to take things comfortably and to have the tea he had almost dreamed of. Two candles reserved for the Shelter Stone were cunningly inserted in a crevice of the shelter and the cooker was put on to boil. Eventually it came to the boil and an excellent breakfast was appreciated to the full. The weather was still unsettled and did not promise well for steady progress. Crusoe in mind, he proceeded to lay the "blessed unction" of solitude to his soul. That friend of our young days might, if transposed in time, have said, "I am deprived of the society of my fellow-men"; and then after a few complaints would have answered himself: "But I am far from the rush of the East India Dock Road and the noise of all manner of engines and loud speakers. Among these loud speakers many walk on two legs and are not the least offensive kind. Here is no kindness and love of mankind, but here also are no unkindness and malice." With such thoughts, and not mentioning to himself the providence of God, he settled for the day. But he reckoned without the Cairngorms. Just as he had set his little world in order, the wind rose, blew heartily into his corner with eddies and hail! Our pilgrim did not hesitate, but hastily packed, and with a map and a few postcards purchased in Braemar commenced an intensive search for the Shelter Stone.

The sun showed for moments about midday, and as the hours passed and observation got keener he found what he already suspected, that he was going over the same ground again and again. Now, however, he profited by the experience. About five o'clock he followed the same stream for the second time, and the genie of the mountain decided that the game was up and elected to show the beauties of his domain. At one time the mist rolled away from the brae face over against Loch Avon and showed the two streams



MAM SODHAIL FROM CARN EIGE

F. C. Garrow

as lines of silver coming from the clouds of heaven and disappearing in the clouds of earth. At another the Shelter Stone precipice and part of Loch Avon lay dark below.

Now the road lay down Robert's corrie, and so to the goal, which was reached a mere twenty-seven hours behind schedule. Arrived at the east end of the stone, he saw, with mixed feelings, a man appear from the other end, quickly followed by another. Then he knew that the rôle of Crusoe was prematurely over. The new arrivals were Glasgow men and were good men and true. In time he forgave them their huge packs, especially when it came to the friendly barter necessary to produce a meal. He had to allow that there was something to say for a spirit stove. Talk flowed freely, and the chains of the town soon fell off all three. That night they slept together, and the last sounds they heard were the driving rain and the crack of the wind against the rocks.

Next morning was clearly more settled, and young Glasgow breasted the hill on the Ben Macdhui side, heading for the Corrour Bothy, and the lone trumper made for the Saddle of Cairngorm. The day was pleasant and sunny, and the Nethy kept pace, like a young Highlander, going to an uneventful career in the lowlands of Strathspey. Soon, too soon, the glamour of the hills departed, and the last miles to the road were hemmed in by foothills. Once the Nethy ran under its bed for about a quarter of a mile. One memory remains, a glass of milk, given in the traditional manner by a farmer's wife near Forest Lodge. With the milk our trumper resigned himself to a return to the twentieth century. The sole trophy of the trip was a small crystal about an inch long. There are more hills in the Cairngorms which, beholding the crystal, he beholds and aspires to climb. The hills can be cruel but they never fail to call their children nor their children to respond.