

THE SPECTRE OF BEN AVON.

BY THE LATE D. D. MCPHERSON.

THE Tayside Stragglers, as our select party of five has been facetiously named, are modest, painfully modest. Though we have a fair record of achievement to our credit, only on one occasion—our November visit to the Shelter Stone—have our doings been chronicled. The fact is that, while we are forward hill-men, we are naturally shy and retiring as plains-men and shrink from publicity in any shape or form. Unfortunately for us, our reserve is being misconstrued. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, our friends, bless them, are expressing grave doubts about our exploits, and hint at something resembling a nineteenth hole to account for, as they put it, the varied tales we spin on our return. They are firmly convinced, for instance, that the Spectre, which one of our number chanced to descry on Ben Avon one misty April morning, cannot possibly be seen, as we aver, on jelly sandwiches and thermos tea. Faced with such incredulity what can we do but become waggish in turn and make-believe that we really are lads of the village? Suppose we try to protest by asserting that four of us are strict teetotalers, or that the Skipper's emergency flask, although carried every trip for years, has not yet been broached. Can you imagine the howls of derision that would arise?—sufficient almost to startle the deer in their fastnesses or the ptarmigan on the high tops. A peaceful life lies not in that direction. Like Brer Fox, we lie low and say nothing, but we propose—subject to editorial acceptance—to write up a few of our experiences, and as an introductory effort the tale of the aforementioned spectre should make a good beginning. First of all meet our worthy party; there is Father, our heavyweight champion, big, hearty, and helpful; his pockets bulge with black-balls and he is ready to go anywhere; the Press, our runner-up, a downright

get-on-with-the-job companion, difficult to keep at home over week-ends; the Court, a stocky canny Scot of the bulldog breed, who always gets there, though generally at the last moment; the Bar, lithe, alert, and seldom still, when equipped for the hills stuffs everything into innumerable and spacious pockets and then looks formidable; lastly, the Skipper, our long-limbed lightweight and planner of trips—usually accused of underestimating distances—never seen without his pipe and prismatic, and is known to enjoy Father's black-balls. And now to our story.

A year ago last April on the very Sunday morning when, by the decree of an all-wise Government, all clocks are put forward one hour, we were blissfully asleep in the Arms of Invercauld at Braemar, depending on the chamber-maid calling us at 6 A.M., summer-time. Alas for the vanity of human wishes, the maiden overslept and we slumbered on undisturbed. When reality did dawn on us all was bustle and hurry. It was a bad start, but worse was to follow. At breakfast we found that the weather-clerk was altogether ignoring the advent of summer-time and had already sprinkled everything outside with the stuff that is seasonable at Christmas-tide. The mist was down and snow fell steadily—a more unpromising morning for the hills could scarcely be imagined. We had come, however, as the show-bills have it, "at enormous expense" to perform our celebrated hill-stunt and were not lightly to be deferred therefrom by any of J.P.'s merry pranks. "On with the dance," we cried. No time was lost, breakfast was hurried through, sandwiches and thermos flasks were thrust into haversacks, coats and sticks collected, and, without standing on the order of our going, we bundled into the hotel car and set off for Loch Builg almost one hour late.

Dark was the swift-flowing Dee, dismal the droop of the pines as our bus swished along the whited roadway—a cheerless, uninviting scene outside, but inside the car was jovial summer of banter and joke. Up on the moor above Crathie conditions improved somewhat; the snow ceased, the atmosphere cleared a little, but the higher hills had conscientious objections to Sunday tramping and refused to

encourage us in any way by showing themselves. In the narrows beyond Corndavon, where we had to stop to remove boulders from the road, an eagle overhead caused some excitement which the Skipper sternly repressed as the car rocked ominously, though when the great bird swooped down with the speed of a thunderbolt he was as keen to be in at the death as the others, but intervening rising ground prevented our witnessing the strike. Shortly after we pulled up at Builg Lodge, a bare low building set on the desolate slopes of Carn Dearg and commanding a dreary wilderness of moorland and lochans. While preparing for the way, the mist rolled down and snow began again. The track played hide-and-seek with us until a compass bearing indicated its position, and after a sharp little scramble we struck it. Drift made the going heavy over the shoulder of Carn Dearg, but a self-imposed task is pleasant when the heart is in it. About a mile and a half from the lodge the track ended abruptly in the middle of the moor. Opportunely the mist lifted long enough to give us a line on a stalker's track winding up a spur of Ben Avon, and we cut over the moor for it. The real work of the day then began. The ascent was anything but graceful, and can best be described as an advance made by a series of floundering and slips. Up in the grassy corrie of the Allt Phouple deep snow made progress somewhat slow, and as we moved onwards each man took his own route through the maze of drift until we were almost at the rigging, then as the mist closed in we converged on a small outcrop of rock. Father was pleased with our progress, and by way of recompense issued a black-ball ration to the troops. We halted while the Skipper consulted the bearings pencilled on the margin of his map, and set his compass, then guided thereby we made for Clach Choutsaich. After our arduous work the comparatively level upper reaches of the mountain with snow only ankle-deep was a very welcome relief. Despite dense mist we made good headway. The first sight of our objective gave us the impression of a towering crag a long distance off, but allowing for mist exaggeration of height and distance we were not surprised when about a score of paces brought

us to its base and revealed the tor in its true proportions, less imposing certainly than first imagined, but still majestic enough in its grisly setting. It recalled the legend of Malcolm Canmore's encounter with the babies, the founders of the strong unruly race of Deeside Coutts, who were all but exterminated by their mortal enemies, the Allans, at Clach Choutsaich. Whether this is the actual battle-ground or not is of little consequence; the stone is there, the name is there, therefore let us take the story as it comes nor be too critical. While musing on the long ago the mist again cleared, and while the Press "snapped" the Stone, the Skipper took the bearing of a much more impressive tor about a quarter of a mile away. Although our friend and enemy, mist, enveloped us before we got there, an easy walk took us to the Mullach, as we called this tor for short, but our introduction to it was somewhat uncanny. As the tor loomed over us we were conscious of a large animal crouching at its base. Its head was on the ground and its ears were laid back, it had a lean and hungry look, and it seemed to be lying there preparing to spring. For a moment an eerie feeling crept over us, then laughing at our folly we wallowed knee-deep through soft drift and came to rest around a rock so shaped and snow-marked as to resemble a crouching boar. Cold and uncomfortable it was at the "Boar's Head" with seating accommodation in the form of ice-coated boulders, thus we lunched standing, making merry, as I have already indicated, on jelly sandwiches and thermos tea. To avoid any accusation of romancing we secured a snap taken on the spot under very unfavourable conditions by our legal friend, the Bar, as proof acceptable in any court that we were not "seein' things at night."

The charms of our "Inn" were not such as to detain us and before long we left our dumb friend, the Boar, to his everlasting vigil and made for the Slochd Mor side of the mountain, getting a glimpse *en route* of the Avon glen in the distance. The Slochd at any time gives the impression of mystery, but this day the writhing mist in the shadow-filled void with nothing visible beyond made one feel as if one stood on the very brink of eternity. Instinctively

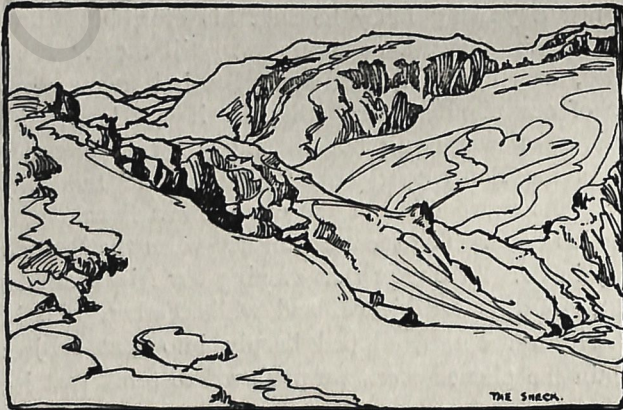
we drew back and Fitzgerald's lines seemed to flash before us:

“ There is a door to which there is no key,
There is a veil past which I cannot see.”

But we must keep our moralisings for another occasion. Sufficient it is to have glimpsed the eeriness of the scene. Following the edge of the Slochd we made our way to the summit tor of Ben Avon, the Leabaidh an Daimh Bhuidhe, the couch of the yellow stag, to find that the stag had long ago crossed the Great Divide. Drift lay deeply all round the tor. And now comes the climax to our tale. We did not know the actual facts until the evening, but that cannot affect their incorporation into the body of our story. Snow was falling slightly, the mist was down, but the sun was endeavouring to break through at the time. To immortalise the occasion the news was broken to us gently that the Bar was to “endeavour” to snap the party at the tor. We protested, but protests were of no avail, so reluctantly we lined up, put on our nicest Sunday smirks, and hoped for the best. The Bar was in front with the camera, moving about to get us centred, when suddenly behind him appeared a shadowy figure. It was of medium height, and its head, encased in a cowl, was downwards bent in meditative attitude. Our friend on the flank to whom this apparition appeared was startled. Thinking it was just a passing fancy he shut his eyes, but when he looked again the strange figure was still there. It stood quietly, swaying gently, and seemed to imitate every movement of our photographer, otherwise it was lost in itself, oblivious of everything but the thought that preoccupied it. As the Bar rapped out, “Steady all,” the swaying ceased, the sharp click of the camera was heard, and the deed was done. The spectre vanished when the Bar moved to rejoin us. At dinner that evening our friend diffidently told us of this experience, and while Father, who is an authority on optics, dipped deeply into that subject to explain the phenomenon, we preferred to think that it was a case of the Spectre of the Brocken or at least a close relative. The sun had turned the mist into a reflective

surface, and our friend had been at the particular angle to catch the reflection of the Bar, who for head-dress that day wore a close-fitting waterproof hat, and his attitude while taking the picture corresponded with that of the vision.

After leaving the summit we made for the Sneck, and before we arrived there the sky cleared as if by magic, and for the rest of the day we climbed and walked in brilliant sunshine, up by the remote and wonderful Garbh Choire to the Priest's Knoll on to the north top of Beinn a' Bhuid by way of Corrie nan Clach, overhung with huge snow cornices. The long high-level walk to the South Top, with the glorious panorama of the corried giants of the Cairngorm range, from the Bynack on the right to Beinn Bhrotain on the left, cheered our hearts and was a continuous feast for eye and mind, yielding a rich harvest of impressions. The easy descent down the Snowy Corrie to the Gairn, the long trail down the now peaceful Slugain with its lovely vista of Lochnagar, the ferry across the Dee, and the short road walk back to our hotel in Braemar completed a day in which each hour was sixty minutes full of good comradeship, of difficulties faced and conquered, of pleasure without alloy, brimful of glorious life.



"THE SNECK."