

A CROWDED DAY IN THE CAIRNGORMS.

BY "LUI BEG."

WE knew that it was indeed a fortunate thing that, before reaching Braemar, we should have at least three hours to rest ourselves. Each of us entertained a decided feeling of lassitude, for this gloriously bright sunny morning was the first of January 1937. Bundling into a carriage with barely a minute to spare, each selected a corner and settled with a sigh of relief for a pleasant forty winks. However, the wonderful conditions denied us such, and for practically the whole journey to Ballater we sat drinking in the glories of Deeside under the wintry sun. Arriving there, the feeling of misery with which we started out was practically dispelled, and we eagerly looked forward to our tramp to Corrou, which we hoped to reach before sundown, if possible. After a cold, disagreeable wait, we started on the last part of our journey to Braemar by bus. As we sped on we began to cast anxious eyes towards the sky where ugly grey clouds were beginning to bank up. As Lochnagar came into view we noticed blankets of snow drifting past the eastern corrie, and by the time we reached Braemar it was snowing quite heavily, although of a sleety nature. Swinging our rucksacks on our backs, we started for our first halt, Corriemulzie, reaching there an hour after leaving Braemar. A stop of ten minutes and an orange and then off to the Linn. We agreed that once there the backbone of the journey would be broken. It is a long, monotonous tramp to the enthusiast with a hefty pack.

The Linn of Dee was reached two hours ten minutes after leaving Braemar. Here we decided to have something to eat, and after changing into our climbing boots we came out of the wood into the heavy snow en route for Derry Lodge. On the way there we met with our first spot of trouble. The snow, being very soft at that time, repeatedly

caked on the soles of our boots. Despite this we reached Derry Lodge exactly an hour after leaving the Linn. This was very good going considering the conditions and our heavy packs. The snow, which had fallen heavily up to this point, showed not the least signs of abating and we began to doubt whether we would reach Corroul before dark, which, at this time of year, would fall about 4 P.M. It is no mean feat locating the bothy in pitch darkness. Nor had we overlooked the probability of a blizzard blowing, which would place us in a very difficult position. After a stop of twenty minutes, we sped off from the Lodge in snow falling as hard as ever and with the knowledge that only an hour of daylight remained. On we went in silence until we sat down on the boulders at the Lui Beg bridge. Casting our eyes skywards, we observed the stars peeping through the grey snow clouds, heralding the possibility of a frosty but pleasant evening. This encouraged us considerably and we set off to tackle the steep slope which leads round Càrn a' Mhaim. Under normal conditions the stretches of wet, peaty earth between the boulders can be observed and avoided. But, at intervals, we went through the snow, slipped on the wet surface of the peat, and fell with considerable force. After much resting, and with tempers frayed, we at last reached the top, a good deal behind schedule. Although three of us felt quite fresh, our fourth member had found it extremely trying and complained bitterly of a tired feeling from the waist downwards. We, however, scoffed at this (later we were to learn our folly), and after giving him a little spirits we made on our way.

The snow was quite powdery owing to the severe frost, which enabled us to make good headway. At this time I was in front, thinking, as any healthy man would, of supper, when I was rudely brought back to my surroundings by a shout to stop. Hurrying back I found our tired friend sitting on a snow-covered boulder. When we asked him, not too kindly, what was wrong, he said that he felt very miserable, that his legs were weak, and that he had a sickly feeling in the pit of the stomach. On looking back, we see now that our next move was the most thoughtless probably

that we have ever made. Instead of retreating the 2 miles to Lui Beg, we urged our unfortunate companion on to Corrou. We gave him more spirits, which probably did him no good, I took up the van, the other two the rear, and off we trudged. However, experience teaches fools, much more does it instruct wise men. On we went, our friend blundering in the rear. Finally, he sat down and refused to budge. This placed us in a quandary but, eventually, we decided that one should carry his pack while the other two should lend him as much bodily aid as possible. In this fashion we were able to make slow headway to a point where the Devil's Point rears his rocky face above the slopes of Càrn a' Mhaim. This proved the final stage of the exhausted man's endurance.

The realisation that we were in a very drastic situation was brought home to us, and it was decided that two should make for Corrou for assistance while the other remained to look after our companion. During the next half-hour he was compelled by reason of the force and bitterness of the wind to lie, spread-eagle fashion, over his companion to shelter him. With the inactivity and the temperature apparently well below freezing, his spirits were indeed lightened when, on hearing voices, he looked up and discovered his two friends bearing down on him with all speed. It was impossible, they declared, to get to Corrou owing to heavy drifts having formed at the end of the Lairig, of such dimensions that the possibility of getting through with our burdens was very slight. This left us no alternative but to return the 3 miles to Lui Beg—an almost impossible task it seemed to us, as we stood there in the snow, but we succeeded. Five hours after turning back we struggled into Lui Beg, sore, tired, and proud. Having done all that we could for our friend, we walked over to Derry, where we had permission to stay.

At 9.30 P.M., while preparing a much-needed meal and conversing generally on the events of the day, we were suddenly confronted by a young man in a very distressed condition, who stood surveying us for at least twenty seconds before he spoke. He then told us that he had left his friend



R. L. Mitchell

WESTWARD FROM CNAPAN NAITHREACHEAN

exhausted in the Lairig an Laoigh seven miles away, and implored us to go to his aid. It would have been almost as credible had he also told us that an elephant with wings was flying about the summit of Ben Macdhui. It seemed to us that everybody was going mad in the Cairngorms; everything going wrong; nothing going right. We took him over to Lui Beg, where he collapsed, and here it was arranged that after we had had some sleep we should go out with Mr Ian Grant, of Lui Beg, and two ghillies to search for the exhausted man. After only an hour and a half of blissful slumber, we were awakened, none too gently, and on going outside found the three men and a pony awaiting us. In more normal circumstances we three would undoubtedly have enjoyed the tramp up Glen Derry, with the moon blinking spasmodically through the snow clouds. As it was, we practically slept as we walked. Occasionally we rode on the pony, but an icy wind curtailed these ever-welcome respites to periods of ten minutes or thereby, after which one was forced to get down and trot alongside to regain the heat. At the end of the glen one of our original party turned back, having decided that he had reached the end of his tether.

Making good headway we passed Coire Etchachan, and having negotiated the slight rise to the Lairig an Laoigh, we became aware of a decided change in the elements. In contrast to the calm of Glen Derry we were faced with a bitterly cold wind from the north. At intervals, when the gale ceased whipping the snow up in clouds, we caught signs of the Dubh Lochan, 3 miles off. On reaching there we turned back and, in extended order, searched diligently on either side of the stream which flows eventually into the lochan. This necessitated a trio of unfortunate men fording the burn, a bitter experience. With not a boulder protruding in midstream, they simply had to jump in knee-deep and get across as fast as possible. Five minutes later they were hanging with icicles from the knees downwards, their feet resenting this treatment to the end of the journey. The snow, which at intervals was blown from the ground by the force of the gale into the form of a mist, proved a considerable

drawback. One was then forced to stop, sometimes quite a lengthy period, until the next man could be seen. Back at the start of the pass we met again, and not a sign of the missing man was to be seen. By way of a final effort, Grant and a ghillie decided to go back for a short distance while we and the pony took shelter behind a boulder. After retracing their steps for about half a mile, they were about to return when Grant observed the arm of the missing man beckoning from behind a boulder. His friend had, the previous afternoon, packed him into a sleeping bag and, placing another over him, had left him thus to get help. And that was how he was discovered at 5.30 the following morning. Half an hour later we were heading back for Lui Beg Cottage satisfied with the result. Arriving there at 9 A.M., we were delighted to see our other exhausted friend waiting at the door, apparently fully recovered. After a meal, we staggered over to Derry, feeling that everybody felt fighting fit except ourselves. There we crept into our sleeping bags for a two hours' rest before once more striking the road to Braemar and thus home.

[It is with some diffidence that I add anything to the above. Experience is bought of errors, and in allowing the spirit of enterprise to outrun discretion, the writer's party broke but one rule. But it is the golden rule of the game, as deep in significance as it is wide in application, and happily more frequently operating than expressed. It is implied in all mountaineering literature, but never better expressed than by G. W. Young. *The game is played so as to secure the greatest happiness for the whole party.*

With the courageous admission that, in this case, the rule was broken, criticism must rest. The Corroul party were not without experience; the Lairig an Laoigh party had apparently little or none. The strength of the former party not only enabled it to get home without outside assistance, but further, to go to the rescue of the second party, who, in facing adverse conditions, knowing their weakness in numbers and experience, fairly courted disaster.

It may be of some import, too, to consider the value of the Corroul as a winter base. The old bothy, once humorously referred to among its visitors as The Hotel, is now more nearly a hovel. Its timbers have gradually disappeared as fuel, until little more than the roof remains. The gradual weathering of the roof and the more rapid internal denudation must shortly bring the Corroul to the verge of

ruin. As an emergency base its value may still be considerable; but to seek assistance there in mid-winter must always be to gamble on a slender chance.

We are greatly indebted to the writer for his very candid record, which, I believe, may have much greater value than the mere reiteration of precepts, however sound.—EDITOR.]

