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CHIPS FROM THE HIGH TOPS.

BY HUGH D. WELSH.

“ I must be rising and I must be going
On the roads of magic that stretch afar,
By the random rivers so finely flowing
And under the restless star.
I must be roving on the roads of glory,
So I'll up and shoe me with red-deer hide.
For youth must be learning the ancient story—
Let the wearied oldsters bide.”

THESE words of Neil Munro have set a-throb the chords of recollection, and the vibrations have stirred anew pictures and dreams stored away in the treasure chest of the mind. All through the long winter the urge to set foot again on the great hills wherein one derives such lasting benefit had to be responded to, but now that the cheering signs of spring are around us everywhere, the craving to be up where there is freedom from the petty annoyances of this workaday world demands satisfaction. We often thought in the dismal days of what the summer would have to offer in the corries and ridges, and lived over again days of ease or days of vigour, and opened the windows of our mind and looked down the long vistas of sunlit or clouded happenings shared in the days that have slipped past all too quickly. We saw again the great corries emptying themselves of mist, and heard the sound of roaring waters; we battled against the wrestle of the gale, the lash of driving rain and stinging

snow; we sensed the comforting feel of rock and scree and heather, and the chill welcome of icy slopes. The recollections of all the beautiful things to be found there were gems to be taken out and polished when one was out of sorts or depressed. And we found them very good.

In the symphony I have built up since the great hills drew me into their hearts there are many themes, and I find it difficult indeed to disentangle what might be worth listening to. At a comparatively early age I was initiated into the delights of upper Deeside by my father who loved our great hills. In these days we, as a family, holidayed near Ballater, and I had to be content with the lesser hills there. During these delightful days we were close to nature, and readily absorbed all that was given us in the way of legends and nature lore. In such a manner was my love for the hills created and encouraged.

My acquaintance with the higher masses began in 1904. For several years an older brother was my companion, and for a season or two we persuaded one friend or another to share in our ventures. We spent a fortnight each year during the month of July in the Cairngorms, and had ample opportunity for exploring thoroughly most of the great corries, and making ourselves familiar with places seldom visited by the ordinary climber. Not only did we camp in the glens or on the broad slopes of the hills, but our little tent housed us for two or three nights at a time on all the summits of the group, including the eastern massif, as well as Lochnagar. Added to all these are the isolated days snatched at intervals during the past three or four years, climbing alone or as a member of Club excursions. Not the least lasting are the memories of two recent periods of solitary scrambling among the grim corries and ridges of the Cuillin in autumn.

Most people prefer to go to the hills at a time when weather conditions are more or less bright and dry; yet nothing helps more to give a certain mysterious charm to the mountains than an occasional ramble through their recesses in bad weather: it is only a half-hearted lover of their scenery who would pray for a constant succession of clear skies.

“ There is much comfort in high hills,
and a great easing of the heart.
We look upon them, and our nature fills
with loftier images from their life apart.
They set our feet on curves of freedom bent
to snap the circles of our discontent.”

It is a far cry back to 1904, but I still have vivid recollections of my introduction to the corries and broad summits of the Cairngorms. It was a wet July, but in spite of that our spirits were by no means damped. On the contrary, what we saw and heard encouraged us to return. In those far-off days a rucksack was a luxury, and our packs consisted of solid slabs of goods and chattels done up in American cloth and carried on our backs by a Heath Robinsonish arrangement of straps. I groan even now when I think of it! We did quite a lot, especially at the head of the Loch Avon corrie. What mist-sodden days we had rummaging among the Féith Buidhe rock slabs, or about the rocky faces and buttresses that are such a feature of this great corrie in which the Shelter Stone lies. Seldom did we feel the kindly warmth of sunlight or see blue sky; but what an entrancing time it was. Few people, I think, realise what a storehouse of beautiful things this loch cradle is. There are unexpected patches and ledges on the rock faces thickly covered with a great variety of flowering plants; cushions of vivid mosses; patterns of delicate lichens. There is the thrill on discovering little pockets of cairngorm stones in the rocks or boulders, and the digging with the hands into accumulations of sand and gravel in the icy-cold streams in the hope of securing good crystals. Of animal life there is a surprising abundance. As a rule the average climber is troubled by midges and flies, but there is an amazing variety of little things that creep and fly, as well as the larger animals. An occasional eagle may be seen; oyster catchers may be watched pottering about the banks of the stream hurrying through the rough ground to Loch Avon, and the wailing of the curlew, like the cry of a lost soul, comes plaintively on the wind. At night, one's senses are soothed by the incessant sound of waters; the loneliness becomes

intimate. The little gusts of wind bring an undercurrent of speech; the gurgle and roar of water seem to hush at times, as if to listen themselves to voices hailing, full of warning or of recognition, at some great distance behind or within their own muttering. Or there may be nights of roaring wind or lashing rain, when the nerves are taut, when one expects the straining canvas to be torn away, the plaything of the rollicking fiends that whoop and raven down the corries.

Memories of such wild nights and days crowd upon one another and jostle for recognition, and one or two are picked out for closer recollection. One night in July 1907 was a memorable experience. Our little tent had been set up a few yards from the summit cairn on Braeriach; and climbers familiar with this elevated plateau will know how little shelter there is. Our first night was very comfortable, but the second was the very opposite. The day had been dull and boisterous, and after an interesting day round Loch Einich three of us settled in for the night. Before midnight the wind rose to a roaring gale which wrenched and wrestled with our frail habitation. The canvas strained and flapped with loud reports, and every minute we expected it to be ripped to ribbons and carried off. The two short tent-poles bent and creaked, and we held on to them to prevent them snapping. One of us crawled out, blinded by flying sand, to place stones all round to keep the little tent down. Gradually the wind died, and a calm morning showed us the whole summit plateau under a scintillating covering of snow and ice crystals 2 inches deep, and the tent frozen hard!

There was a day, too, when Coire Etchachan was filled with stinging lances of chill rain, with the thunderous roar of the swollen stream adding to the shriek of the wind as it swooped down from the upper corrie. John Stuart Blackie must have experienced such a day when he wrote :

“ Here brew ship-foundering storms their force divine,
Here gush the fountains of wild-flooding rivers;
Here the strong thunder frames the bolt that shivers
The giant strength of the old twisted pine.”



W. J. Middleton

BEN AVON

Another thrilling day calls with an insistent voice. I had been exploring in Harta Coire, under the cold shadow of Sgùrr na h-Uamha in the Black Cuillin in Skye, and had come out along the scree below the grim rocks of Sgùrr nan Gillean. Mist had come down unnoticed and a boisterous south-westerly wind sprung up. Sudden whipping rain caused me to shelter for a considerable time under a huge boulder, and from there I watched the grey curtains of water sweeping down Glen Sligachan gradually obscuring the outlines of the hill masses. My intention had been to cross the long ridge coming down from Sgùrr nan Gillean and terminating in the bold outcrop Nead na h-Iolaire, but this was now out of the question, as darkness was coming on and I had to get down to Sligachan before the light failed. A minute or two after leaving my shelter I was soaked through, and dropped down to the river, intending to cross it and pick up the path on the other side at the foot of Marsco. The passage of the swollen stream was a ticklish problem, but, after being swept off my feet into a deep pool, I was able to drag myself out by the long heather on the opposite bank. No doubt I was a sorry spectacle, but I saw the funny aspect of it, and knelt in the sodden heather and had a good laugh. My squelching progress down the glen was enlivened by bursts of song and whistling, for I had had a great day, and there was comfort ahead.

The crossing of the Etchachan burn in brown spate, with the water waist-high, was an experience my brother and I enjoyed in 1908. The previous day we had left our tent on the summit of Cairngorm and come down to Braemar for provisions. A stormy night kept us in the village, but the morning broke fair, and when we passed Derry, Donald Fraser and Mackintosh of Luibeg were having a game of golf among the ancient firs. Heavy rain came on while we were crossing the swollen Glas Allt, and we had some misgivings about the crossing of the stream at the foot of Coire Etchachan. No helpful boulders were visible; we were wet anyway, and plunged in at the usual ford. The pressure of water tugging at our waists was very trying;

stones were rattling against our legs ; but by dint of cautious movement, hand in hand, shouting to one another, we got safely across. Never shall I forget the awe-inspiring sight of the stream as it came down from the Loch in what appeared to be one huge waterfall. Its roar was deafening, and we frequently stood in voiceless wonder at such an amazing spectacle. Huge waves washed out of the Loch from a curtain of mist, and when we crossed to the crest above Loch Avon, there ascended to us the hoarse shout of waters let loose. The sight of the Féith Buidhe coming down the rocks was terrifying, but we had to cross through a chaos of leaping water in order to ascend Cairngorm by Coire Raibeirt. After two or three attempts our persistence was rewarded, and it was two exhausted people who arrived safely at the tent at the summit. It is said the Deil's aye kind to his ain, but such an experience is worth going through, because it makes one appreciate in a peculiar way man's puny efforts when battling against the forces of nature.

Summer-time bad weather is quite a different thing from that to be met with during the short days of winter, and my few bouts with the snow-laden numbing gales have been shared by a few Club members during the past three years on the occasion of excursions to Lochnagar. Of these I need say little, except that although at the time the sensations were not too comfortable, the recollections give one a great sense of satisfaction of having fought more or less successfully against a bitter gale, carrying with it stinging hail or snow which numbed the senses. One can live over again the toilsome progress in soft, powdery, knee or waist-deep snow, or the plodding through a more or less wet, compacted covering. One even has opportunity for watching the formation of cornices, or of ever-changing wreaths, on whose smooth contours the wind carves out the most beautiful flutings, curves, and miniature cornices. And, after all, it is a great adventure.

But there is not always bad weather in our great hills, and I can still conjure up pictures of many days and nights of great beauty, comfort, and healing. There have been days when the hills have dimmed in the quivering heat haze,

and the rocks have been almost too hot to touch. In the glens there has been the drowsy hum of bees and other insects and the cheerful whirr of grasshoppers in the grass. A scarcely perceptible breeze, warm, and laden with the scent of heather and fir, has gently stirred the parched vegetation, and done little to give a sense of coolness. The bare, stony hilltops are quivering in the heat, and the solitude is peopled with strange fancies.

After a spell of such days the evenings become cool, and then it is that one glimpses what is perhaps the most soul-stirring wonder of the high tops. Members of the Club who took part in the all-night excursion to Bynack More in June 1936 may perhaps recollect the humbling pageant of colour and peacefulness presented to us on that occasion. It will always be a gem of beauty to me. We came up from Nethy Bridge in the evening. The sun sank in a blaze of gold and orange, while the hills and glens darkened to myriad shades of blues and purple. All night long the northern sky glowed with a golden radiance, and the hills of Ross, Sutherland, and Caithness were sharply outlined against the glory. Slowly the radiance crept eastwards; the colours brightened to shades of primrose yellow and emerald; the sun rose blindingly over the sea; the great hill masses near us, slumbering overnight, cold and remote under their patchwork of snow, were warmed by the increasing rosy glow; the filmy shadows slipped downwards to the glens; there was a sigh of awakening, and a stirring, and it was a new day.

Of the many nights spent at Loch Etchachan one in particular is deeply graved in my mind. Our little tent was pitched a few yards from the loch edge, and we sat at the opening looking across the calm water towards Cairngorm. A thin crescent moon was set high above the Ben Macdhui snowfields and mirrored in the dark water. The sky was cloudless, and glowed with delicate shades of emerald, lavender, orange, and yellow, fading away as night deepened. A slowly moving girdle of rosy-grey cloud wisped silently across the dark mass of Cairngorm. The silence was oppressive, yet soothing, and we could almost feel the pulse of mother earth.

Sunrises welcomed from a summit above a sea of gently moving cloud are wonders that are lasting in their impressions. With our little tent perched near the summit cairns of all the Cairngorm giants we had the good fortune to witness many instances of the ever-wonderful day-birth. And they are not readily forgotten.

Most climbers are not too keen to spend much time in the company of mist or cloud, but I can assure them that a spell of it is a great education. One July my brother and I spent almost eleven days above 3,000 feet on Ben Macdhuì and Cairngorm and literally lived in the clouds. Our tent sheltered us for three nights on the rough gravel a few yards from the cairn on Ben Macdhuì, and during the whole period of our stay the mist, or rather cloud, was so dense that daylight was very dim. Everything was clammy with moisture, and there seemed to be a constant rustle and whisper coming from the rocks and gravel. During the long dim days we spent in this ghostly region we did not see another human being, but it was an experience that enabled us to acquire a peculiar familiarity with this barren area. Our camp was set up here and there on the great plateau between Ben Macdhuì and Cairngorm, never very far from water, but during the day we wandered about fully occupied with observing and noting the thousand and one features generally overlooked by the ordinary visitor. In a subconscious way landmarks were noted and remembered, for compasses were never used, and we seemed to find our way about without apparent effort. Had the fairies a hand in it? On several occasions this subconscious guidance has been very valuable, but I am quite unable to describe or point out to people the particular features which act as pointers.

A day on a great mountain mass in thick mist is not a day lost, even though a view from the summit is not obtained. Too many climbers ascend the hills with the object of either getting to the top or obtaining a good view from the summit cairn. To my mind that is not the proper spirit in which to approach these high places. The attainment of the summit is, of course, very laudable, and there is naturally great satisfaction when a good view is the reward of endeavour.



LOCH AVON

W. A. Ewen

Nevertheless, great enjoyment can be, and is, experienced by wandering on a hill in thick mist, because one has to notice objects more particularly, take more time, and see things that are generally overlooked. And so, such a day is a great educator.

One hears great tales of spectral figures and strange sounds away up there in the corries, but while it has not been my good fortune actually to see such beings as may haunt the solitudes, I have heard sufficient to convince me that such do exist. Friends and others are sceptical, but the experience has been too frequent to be ignored. Not only have footsteps been heard in various places but voices have been distinct. In places, too, I have a strong sensation of somebody being beside me, and my brother had the same feeling. We have listened to the most beautiful music and singing, so clear that individual voices or instruments could be picked out unconsciously. Such strains were exquisitely sweet and soothing, and we became so accustomed to them that we did not become alarmed. At first it was rather startling to hear it in such places, but any apprehension was calmed by the wistful sweetness. The tantalising feature was that though the sounds were clear and distinct we could never pick up the air or rhythm. We thought at first that all these sounds were created by the wind in the rocks and precipices, by falling water, and so on, but they came to us where such concrete features were far away. The strange thing was that friends we had with us did not hear them.

Localities, or definite places, are often associated with some happenings grave or gay, and the mere mention of names stirs up recollections of some incidents. To me, round the Shelter Stone cluster such a multitude of happenings of personal experience that selection is difficult. On July 6, 1907, this haven of refuge was the scene of perhaps the first "At Home" ever held there. Three of us were in residence, and before leaving town had sent out a number of invitations to this function, and even had a printed menu! It was a day of roaring wind, lashing rain, and wild waters, but three of our guests turned up.

It was here, also, in July 1905, that I first met our

President, a tired little kilted boy with a dirty tear-stained face. There was a night, too, in 1906, when seventeen people, in various attitudes of repose, more or less endeavoured to woo sleep. But the tales are legion! At a certain turn in the track high above Loch Etchachan will come out of the mist a voice saying, "Excuse me, but do you know your way about here?" So spoke a young man who had been wandering for two or three hours, quite lost, not even knowing what part of the mountain he was on. The summit cairn of Ben Macdhui will always have the figures of two young men I guided over to Rothiemurchus in a chill mist in July 1910. Fresh snow covered the summit plateau, icicles plastered the cairn, yet these two men stripped to the waist and rubbed one another down with embrocation to keep out the cold. Round Corrou Bothy hovers the figure of old Charlie Robertson, a keeper of the old school, a type now unfortunately fast disappearing. What happy memories I have of nights spent with him in the firelight—old Charlie in his big chair, and us squatted on the floor listening to his tales, with the wind shaking the little house and drawing sparks up the chimney. How we liked to listen to him telling of the cloud-burst on the Devil's Point that just missed the bothy; the legends, creepy stories of ghosts and fairies; for, like ourselves, he had heard strange things away up there. Derry Lodge will always be synonymous with Donald Fraser, the recollection of whose never-failing kindness and hospitality, amplified by his wife and daughter, still warms the heart. In almost every square mile of this vast storehouse of precious things there is some feature or other that is linked up with some happening of memory.

We have in our great hills a wonderful heritage, and should endeavour to make the best use of it. To me, climbing is a search for beauty. Somewhere or other I read that beauty is as necessary to a man as food and drink; spiritually he cannot exist without it. And I think I have found it so. The hills are beautiful in their purity, in their simplicity, and in their freedom; they bring repose and contentment. Released from physical considerations the mind is rested in the splendours around, the vision sees in the luminous

vistas, the delicate subtle blending of colours, the bold shadows, and the slow passage of galleon-like clouds, the work of a Divine hand.

These, then, are random "Chips from the High Tops," gathered upon many days of wandering among the corries and broad summits of the great hills that crowd about the "infant rill of Highland Dee." If they have interested you, I am glad; if not, well, they have given me great pleasure in their recollection.

"Take them, O heart,
the joy of comrades and the thrill of strife.
Who has the hills for friend
has a good-speed to end
his path of lonely life,
and wings of golden memory to depart:
take them for love, true heart."