

CAIRNGORM—MECCA OF THE FAITHFUL.

BY WILMA HAY.

HUNTING for a needle in a haystack is a proverbially hard proposition, and finding members of a climbing party on Cairngorm in thick weather is scarcely less so. This was the problem set us on July 25 last year on the occasion of a Meet of the Moray Mountaineering Club, the notice of which gave no indication of the proposed route.

Unable to join the main party at Coylum Bridge, we decided to make the ascent from Derry Lodge. At 9 A.M., then, we set off gaily through the scented firs of Glen Derry. From the upper, open glen we could see that weather conditions beyond the watershed, towards the Lairig an Laoigh, were not to be of the best.

The play of light and shadow in Derry relieved to a great extent the monotony of the trudge up this familiar glen, but the way in which the mist poured out of Coire Etchachan, an indication of the shape of things to come, was anything but reassuring. Two hours after leaving Derry Lodge, we topped the watershed in thin drizzle and a chill north wind, and looked down into the mist-filled Lairig. From the hidden slopes of Beinn Mheadhoin came the roar and rush of swollen waters, and a thinning of the mist revealed glimpses of white torrents magnificent in spate. Our progress down the sodden track was brightened somewhat by a gradual lifting of the mist. Crossing the stream just above the Dubh Lochans, we skirted the foot of Beinn Mheadhoin into Glen Avon, taking advantage of deer tracks among the moraines and peat hags. At this stage of the journey the rain was at its worst, and difficulty was experienced in crossing the swollen Avon. The peat-bogs on the lower slopes of A' Chòinneach were very treacherous, but the going improved as we progressed upwards to the Saddle between Loch Avon and the headwaters of the Nethy.

The rain had now ceased but the mist was still thick ; Loch Avon was invisible, and a chill wind came up Strath Nethy.

It was now after 1 P.M. and it seemed useless to go looking for anybody on Cairngorm in such conditions, and besides, we were hungry! A slow rising of the mist revealed an entrancing picture of the ruffled waters of Loch Avon sparkling under shafts of sunlight which lit up the submerged golden sands at the margins. In this light the colours of the vegetation and scree were extraordinarily brilliant, and the myriad shades of blue, so characteristic of this lovely



sheet of water, were intensified to a marked degree. It was a picture worth the long journey, worth the rain.

The object of the excursion now being abandoned, we decided to return by the Shelter Stone and Coire Etchachan. Above us the mist wove in and out among the splintered crags of Stac an Phàraidh and presented an impressive picture. Eventually, after wading the Féith Buidhe, we reached this haven of refuge to find, to our surprise, three members of the party we had set out to find. No one had gone to Cairngorm—the faithful were having a day off, so that our last-minute change of plan had saved us a fruitless search!

These three set out for Coylum Bridge, disappearing very soon in the mist, while we directed our steps towards Loch Etchachan. The steep ascent has many places where one unconsciously lingers and looks back on the magnitude and magnificence of the setting in which the Shelter Stone lies. Leaving the path on the plateau, we diverged to the lower slopes of Beinn Mheadhoin and rediscovered the well-preserved walls of a small shieling tucked away in the side of a moraine. The evening light in Glen Derry softened the beautiful colours in this green glen and, for a time, we lay in the heather at the Etchachan ford to appreciate the scene before us. The late sunlight glowing on the fir trunks of the old Caledonian forest gave a friendliness and warmth that was a fitting climax to another day on the hills.