

The Cairngorm Club Journal.

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ECHOES FROM THE CORRIES.

BY HUGH D. WELSH.

“ Grey winding glen with long grasses blowing,
Swept by the stormwind and wet with the rain ;
Burns spraying high with the rush of their flowing,
What would I give now to know you again !
Hills of my heart, you have charms for beguiling
All of God’s world and His heavens above ;
Stern to the stranger, bleak and unsmiling,
Bleak, but how dear to me—Hills that I love.”

GRAHAM DALLAS.

THE Editor of the Club *Journal* is an individual whose job is an unenviable one, for he is ever on the outlook for suitable material for his publication for the current year and for the following year. He is very persistent, and rightly so, and it is up to members to fall in gracefully with his requests which are couched in such flattering periods! Soon after the appearance of the 1937 *Journal* I rashly agreed to contribute an article for the 1938 issue on a subject I thought would give members an added interest in the group of mountains they have come to regard as their own particular recreation ground. No sooner had I given the undertaking than I was presented with a bundle of books from the Editor’s library, with the suggestion that in them I might find something bearing upon the subject I had in mind! It is not a subject to be embarked upon lightly, but one requiring a great amount of search and selection, and I found I could not give it the attention required. The result was that I had to ask for time. That was allowed, but I was not

permitted to escape contributing something. I pleaded the usual excuse, lack of time, without success, so was asked to write upon something that would come more or less readily to the pen. I thus venture to inflict upon readers of the *Journal*, or rather those who are misguided enough to peruse this, a further portion of "Chips from the High Tops" disguised under another title. The Editor must take all blame!

A vast amount of mist has rolled out of the Cairngorm corries since I first ventured into their recesses, but the whole of it will not obscure the recollections of the myriad things experienced there during these many years. I am fully aware of the difficulty of conveying to others impressions which are intensely vivid to myself, and also of the fact that what is interesting to me may be boring to others.

It seems but a short time ago since I set out eagerly on my baptismal visit to the Cairngorms in company with my brother Willie and a friend, J. K. Forbes, in 1904. Did I say "baptismal"? The amount of rain experienced was enough to damp for ever any enthusiasm, but it only seemed to encourage. At that time there was a vogue for linen hats, and we were all equipped with this headgear in the hope that they would counteract the warmth of the hot sun and keep our heads cool. But alas! I can still sense our squelching progress among the peat hags at the base of Beinn Mheadhoin in the Lairig an Laoigh, with the white linen hats limp and sodden, and the starch caking on our faces. It was a long day for a beginner, groaning under a heavy pack, and I nearly gave out on reaching the outlet of Loch Avon in rapidly gathering darkness, and being told that we had to get over the skyline ahead before settling down for the night. The Féith Buidhe slabs then seemed very remote indeed. But after all, the Shelter Stone was to be our headquarters for a fortnight and I had no idea where that was. A day or two after, we were to be joined by J. K. F.'s father, so J. K. and my brother tramped into Braemar to meet him, leaving me at the Shelter Stone. It was a sopping day, with low mist, and superlatively dismal. But I had an interesting time exploring among the chaos of boulders in



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the neighbourhood, finding pockets of cairngorms embedded in the rock. It was late in the evening when I heard a faint hail coming thinly down from the crest above, and I hastened to get a fire going under the overhang of the Shelter Stone. In due course three bedraggled objects stepped into the fire-glow, and I yet see distinctly the gnome-like figure of J. K.'s father under the inadequate protection of an umbrella, with a large wicker fishing basket on his back, on the top of which was strapped a bundle of what was once four plain loaves, with shreds of brown tissue paper hanging grotesquely from them. One outstanding feature of our spell among the great solitudes during that year was the way in which we ended each day. It made a lasting impression, and one which will ever be a bright light in the mind. After our final meal, partaken of in the light of a flickering candle, and just before we settled down for the night, we bared our heads, and old Forbes read aloud a chapter from St John's Gospel and offered up a little prayer. In such a setting, the dark precipices looming above us ghostly in the mist, the sound of whispering, talking waters, the restless wind fumbling and moaning in the corrie, this simple act seemed very fitting, and we lay down silently, fortified against the dark hours.

In thus making the Shelter Stone our headquarters we had ample opportunity of becoming intimately familiar with the rock faces that close in the upper end of the great Loch Avon corrie. Visitors to the Shelter Stone may have observed high up on the steep face on the opposite slope of Cairngorm a small cave just at the base of the rock, but how few have climbed up to it? Tradition has it that this cave is the result of digging operations in a search for cairngorm stones. It is of small extent, but what is worth while is the amazing variety of flowering plants to be found growing luxuriantly on the earthy debris spread out at the entrance. In addition, it forms an excellent viewpoint. The precipice above the Shelter Stone was the scene of many an exhilarating scramble, primarily for Alpine plants, but I would not care to venture now upon some of the places we so thoughtlessly tackled successfully. Looking upon them now, after years of gathered

sense, I wonder how we had the nerve to attempt them without a rope! One place in particular (I cannot describe it) gave us an hour or two of anxiety, for an impossible smooth face stretched above, and our stance was so small that feet tended to numb. Holds were meagre, few, and widely spaced, and a slight drizzle had made the rock slippery. The very recollection of it makes me hold breath and draw myself together, but after very, very careful movement we got down, with trembling legs, pouring with perspiration. But our climbs on the crags of this corrie yielded a rich harvest of plants, gathered at the request of the late Professor J. W. H. Trail, of Aberdeen University. We even attempted to climb down from the top of the precipice to get a photograph of an eagle's nest, but the difficulties were too great for our inexperience.

The sight of the collection of cairngorm stones in the keeper's house at Luibeg in Mackintosh's time was an incentive to us to dig in the gravels in streams and at the bases of the crags. After diverting the course of the Féith Buidhe and digging in pockets of gravel in the bed of the stream with our bare hands until we nearly wept with the pain created by the icy cold water, we were fortunate in securing many excellent specimens, ranging in colour from pale straw to almost black. But our best finds were the result of hand-digging at the foot of Hell's Lum, a chimney in the precipice rising between the Féith Buidhe and Coire Domhain. On one occasion we were so intent upon our mining operations that we failed to notice a change in the weather, and were suddenly deluged by torrential rain with an onslaught of thunder and lightning. As many no doubt know, there is little shelter to be got up on the Féith Buidhe slabs, but we covered most uncomfortably under what overhangs we could get, soaked and stunned. Those who have not experienced a thunderstorm on the high hills have missed one of the most awesome and terrifying happenings. So terrific were the peals and cracks of thunder echoing continuously in the corrie that the solid rock seemed to quiver and tremble. The lightning was so frequent and blastically brilliant, lighting up with a purple or bluish

glare the streaming rocks, that we were blinded and dazed. But when it all passed over, what peace there was, such glowing sunshine, such heartening fresh odours, and everything sparkled and scintillated.

Another time of storm was in 1907 when we were camped in the shallow Choire Mhoir, high up on Ben Macdhui, facing up the Garbh-choire of Braeriach. After a sultry day, the storm broke in the late evening and continued far into the night. The reverberations of thunder crashingly echoed from the corries made the ground quake, and we sat at the tent door watching the incessant lightning glare. It was a great experience.

Rainstorms in summer are bad enough, but what is worse is encountering snow or sleet in July on the high plateau. At any other season one is more or less prepared for that sort of thing, but in summer our clothing is not just suited to a visitation of this kind. In July 1906 three of us had been exploring the plateau between Ben Macdhui and Cairngorm. Our tent was pitched near the head waters of Coire Raibiert, and we were near Lochan Buidhe, sitting in a depression waiting for a pan of water to boil over a spirit lamp. It was a cold day, rather gloomy. At first a few drifting flakes settled down, but we thought it would pass. In a few minutes the wind increased from the north, laden with heavy wet snow that plastered us thickly. We made for the tent as rapidly as we could, blinded and benumbed, through a driving whiteness, and on reaching it could hardly unlace the entrance, so frozen were our hands.

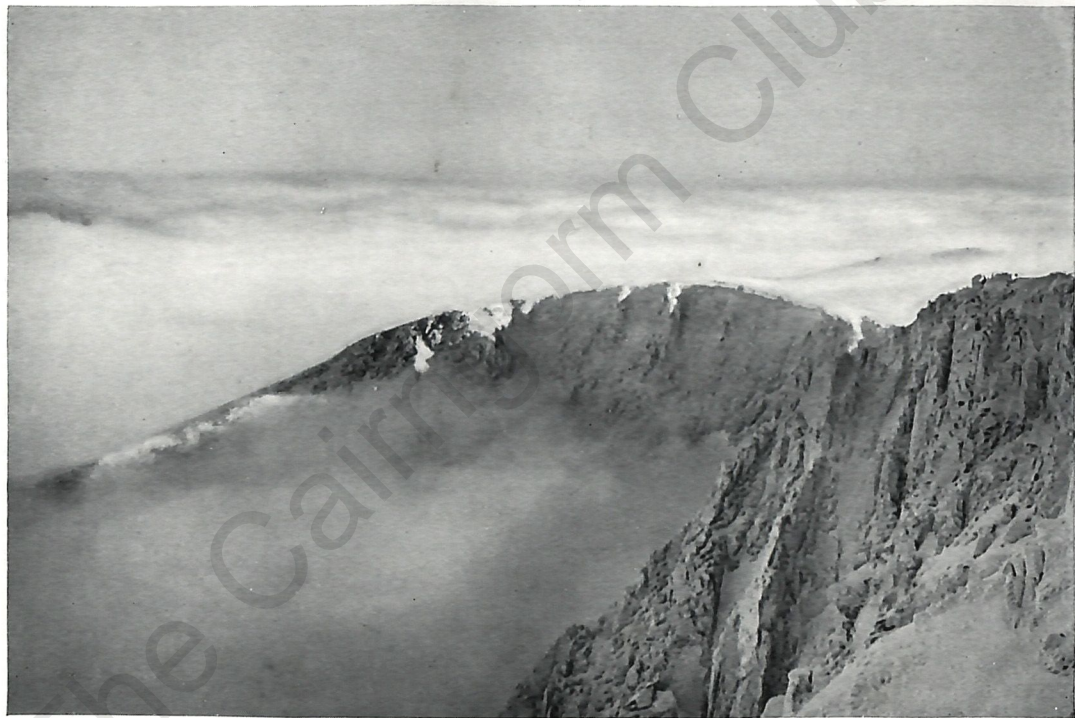
In September 1922 my wife and I ascended Ben Macdhui in a bitter north wind that so chilled the face that we could not speak. Above Loch Etchachan everything was covered with fine, dry, powdery snow several inches deep, and the cairn was a beautiful sight draped with icicles. Lower down it was mild!

The recollection of these days of snow brings to mind several wonderful winter days on Lochnagar with members of the Club during the past three or four years. One of my earliest was in March 1935 when, ascending from Allt-na-giubhsaich, we battled against a gale in mist, blinded by

fine blown snow, over the knees in dry drifts. The elements were too much for us; turning back somewhere above the Fox's Well, we joined the rest of the party at the col below the Well. I can still feel the snowdrift forming at my back as we crouched for lunch. A kilt to most people would be the last thing to wear on a snow climb in winter, but, wearing this dress daily as I do, this was the solitary occasion on which I suffered from the use of it, for I got frost-bite above the knees, particularly on the inside of the legs!

The very opposite of such an experience was the Club excursion to Lochnagar in February of the present year. It was an occasion when the work of the Creator was revealed in splendour and beauty, unexpectedly, and in the hush of adoration. The mountain was under deep, hard snow, but the surface was encrusted with what I can only liken to a carpet of frozen feathers and plumes. Mist was down above the Fox's Well, but as we scrambled up the encrusted boulders on the edge of the corrie it sank slowly and silently below us, gradually revealing the glittering ice-encased precipices rising against a washed blue sky, calm, and beautifully cruel. For the remainder of the day a pearly grey, rose-tinted sea of cloud lay beneath us, and all that was seen of the rest of Scotland was the upper half of the Cairngorm group, white and majestic.

Bad weather on the hills gives one a new appreciation of what one sees and experiences, and it is not the dismal, disagreeable thing one would imagine. Personally, I do not go to the hills merely for the sake of getting to the top and being able to say I was there. Even in bad weather there is a great deal of enjoyment and value to be got out of it, and I can wander quite happily with water streaming from me, and buffeted by wind. In the Cuillin in Skye during my three recent periods of solitary scrambling among the grim corries and ridges, filthy weather was very frequent, but there is a wonderful fascination in wandering under such conditions in these savage places. In September 1937 I made an ascent of Marsco, that graceful mass rising on the east side of Glen Sligachan. It was a wet, gloomy day with a rough wind, and I made the ascent by the sweeping ridge



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that faces down Glen Sligachan. Thick mist descended when I was about half-way up, and I got a great shock when I reached the crest and suddenly looked down into nothing, for I was not prepared for such a narrow ridge. The rain beat into my face and I got the full pressure of the south-westerly gale. Sudden rents in the grey curtain induced me to sit up aloft beside the tiny cairn for almost two hours. Saturated and streaming with water I had my reward, for the startlingly impressive views towards Loch Coruisk framed in storm-cloud were worth any discomfort, as were also those of Blaven, Clach Glas, and Garbh-Bheinn, and away down to Loch Ainort.

I have had the good fortune to have slept for several nights on all the Cairngorm summits, including Beinn a' Bhùird and Ben Avon, and a great experience it is. In 1908 my brother and I spent three nights in July in our little tent on the rough gravel a few yards from the cairn on Ben Macdhuì, and during that time the mist was so dense that daylight was very dim. These were the days before we knew about the Ferla Mhor, the ghost that haunts the summit plateau, and although we never saw him, sounds we heard could quite well have been caused by him. So we missed a great opportunity. What miserable anxious nights we sometimes spent on these lofty places when rain lashed, drumming on the straining, flapping canvas, and us frail mortals holding on to the short tent poles to prevent them snapping. But these things are very pleasant to look back upon!

But there are days when the comforting hills slumber in quivering heat, drenched with sunshine, parched and dry. In conditions like these it requires considerable effort to expend much energy in clambering up stony slopes. But it has compensations. One can indulge in frequent plunges in cool water or lie and gaze out upon the scarcely ruffled surface of some of the higher lochs. I remember getting badly burned as a result of sun-bathing on the rocks on the shore of Lochan Uaine on Cairn Toul. The rock was so hot! On such days the nights are usually cool, with clear, delicately coloured skies, the slight breeze lightly perfumed with elusive scents. Then it is that one seems to become

steeped in the mystic hauntedness of these lonely places, and one's inner chords vibrate to the touch of invisible fingers, the echoes from which go singing down the corridors of memory, and the themes are innumerable and heartbreaking. The sun and wind for happiness, the grey gloom for thought.

In my article in the 1937 *Journal* I mentioned hearing softly beautiful soothing singing and music in some of the corries. A rather interesting and not easily explained experience fell to my lot in Skye in 1935. One night, or rather early morning, as I lay half awake in my bedroom, I was conscious of some woman's voice softly singing a lullaby, the air of which was quite familiar but elusive. Listening idly, I suddenly remembered there was no woman occupying a room near mine, and further, the voice was a typically Highland one. I rose, listened in the passage—silence; nor was there a sound, apart from the hush of the river, outside the window. The room above was empty, and the voice was distinctly in my room, and came from someone who appeared to walk to and fro. I gave it up, went back to bed, and gradually fell asleep. Inquiry in the morning yielded no explanation, apart from the fact that my room, instead of being numbered 13, was 12A! Although I have occupied that room on my subsequent visits to Skye, I have not heard the singing again. On my return to Aberdeen after this experience, I discovered from a friend who knew the house well that my room is below what in earlier days was a nursery, and the lullaby I heard was one sung by an old nurse. The tantalising thing is that this old person is still alive!

Places often have a strange effect on one, and in some instances there may be a distinct feeling of obstruction. For instance, I have wished often to go down to the mysterious An Lochan Uaine at Ryvoan nestling deep between Creag nan Gall and Creag Loisgte. Two or three times I have been within sight of it, in company of others, but something inexplicable holds me back, and I have a feeling that I must go there alone. Some day I shall fare forth and perhaps find what the fairies have in store for me! Also, much as I would like to see Dunvegan in Skye and look upon the

treasures there, something tells me to keep away, and so strong is the feeling that I have refused invitations to accompany friends to that ancient castle, and I have not been near it!

As I write these words I sense around me a multitude of happenings and impressions, grave and gay, jostling one another and clamouring for recognition. I hear all their voices, feel the pressure of their insistence, and the warmth of contact. But, much as I would like to lead them forward and introduce them to those who are prepared to listen to their tales, I must refrain, because it is so difficult to know which to present. The echoes of their clamouring come softly out of the Cairngorm corries and sing in the depths of the grim Cuillin, making a great symphony that is ever new, and one can listen to it again and again, picking out here and there a theme that leads away, away.

“ There is a region of heart’s desire
free for the hand that wills :
land of the shadow and haunted spire,
land of the silvery glacier fire,
land of the cloud and the starry choir,
magical land of hills :
loud with the crying of wind and streams,
throng with the fancies and fears of dreams.”