

THE LIFE PRESERVERS' SOCIETY.

JAMES A. PARKER.

No, this article has nothing whatever to do with the activities of people armed with "short sticks with loaded heads, used for defence against assailants," or the other way about. It simply deals with the doings of a small group of business and professional men of mature age (several of whom are members of our own Club), who, armed with nothing more formidable than walking-sticks, went away out into the country every Saturday for long walks to enjoy the fresh air and their own congenial company. It was considered that this would be better for our health than working, more or less hard, in the office. Hence the above title, which was that which we gave to the Society.

The scheme was started several years ago by the late Mr William Tawse, who was in command and made all the arrangements for the walks. The membership of the Society was about twenty and, for postal reasons, not less than that number. Every Saturday those members who could get away would leave Aberdeen by motor cars in the early forenoon and proceed to some suitable starting-point, 30 to 40 miles out, and from it walk across country by disused road, path, or hillside to a specified point to which the motors would, or should, have proceeded to wait for the arrival of the walkers. Sometimes the motors and/or the hikers would fail to turn up at the specified point and complications would ensue. But it was great fun, and the party would then be driven to a friend's house or a convenient hotel for afternoon tea, and thereafter motor back to Aberdeen for supper.

The writer was roped into the Society owing to his having prepared in 1931, at Mr Tawse's request, a schedule of about two dozen suitable walks, the average length of which was about 12 miles. The total number of walks accomplished

since the inception of the scheme was well over 200, and Mr Tawse took part in all. The trips were always delightful and were attended by an average of, say, eight members. The season was from mid-February to mid-July. The former date being fixed to avoid the worst of the winter and the latter to avoid disturbing game.* The writer took part in many of the outings, and it may be of interest to recall a few of them.

We were out every Saturday, wet or fine; but on the whole had always good weather, or said that we had. The really bad days were mighty few. Probably the second worst day was that on which we traversed the skyline of the Garvock Hills from north to south in a stiff southerly gale with drenching rain. Really not very pleasant, as there was no shelter; but with a change of footgear and a good tea at Fettercairn none of us was any the worse.

A mighty cold walk was from Rosehearty to near Strichen by the direct road in February 1938, with a strong, cold north-east wind. The only shelter that we were able to get was in a little shop by the roadside, where the goodwife put us into her parlour and, in order to make us comfortable, put two shovelfuls of burning peat into the grate. The chimney refused to draw, and in a few minutes the little room was so full of pungent peat-reek that we could hardly see across it. Then one man said that he would try the old wife's cure for a smoky chimney, which was to stand the poker up against the front of the grate. This he did with apparent confidence; but the result was a complete failure, and matters became worse than before. Then another man calmly suggested that the poker would be more usefully employed if it was reversed and pushed up the chimney to open the damper! This he did with immediate success, and the room soon cleared and we were then able to enjoy the excellent Irish

* For fuller details of the Society reference should be made to "Braemar Octotodde," 1939, which records a Society Meeting at Braemar on April 14-16 in honour of the eightieth birthday of Dr Walter A. Reid, who was one of the founders of the Society. There is a copy of this little book in the Club Library which Dr Reid presented to the Club.

stew which he produced from a large thermos. The first man said little; but his appetite showed no sign of having been affected by his failure.

On a later occasion the second man aforesaid went one better, and previous to leaving Aberdeen, and unknown to the others, concealed in the boot of one of the motors the uncooked ingredients for nine rations of Irish stew, a primus lamp, and a pressure cooker. Towards the end of the walk he and two others rushed on by a short-cut ahead of the main party to the cars, which were waiting at Migvie School. The pressure cooker was at once got out of its hiding, and into it were placed the meat, potatoes, and onions, pepper and salt added, the whole shaken up, and the lid screwed down. The cooker was then placed on the primus stove and heat applied, and in about thirty minutes we were serving out rations of Irish stew piping hot and excellently cooked. Splendid!

On one occasion there were only two hikers—W. Tawse and myself. We started from Aldivalloch and walked across the hills to Blackwater Lodge. From the latter we walked due north by road and finally by a path on the east side of Cairn Crome to the gateway at the entrance to the private road leading up the glen to Glenfiddich Lodge, where the motor had been instructed to wait for us. The car was not there! The driver had arrived all right; but the gatekeeper had assured him with the utmost confidence that we would not come over the hill but would simply have followed the road all the way to the Lodge and would be there. So the driver went up the glen to the Lodge to wait for us. This was a bit awkward; but fortunately a motor cyclist turned up and kindly went up the glen to the Lodge and told our driver that he had better go down the road and pick us up.

A particularly fine walk was from Allnaguibhsaich by the south side of Loch Muick to the Black Burn, and on by the high-level path over the hills to Bachnagairn. The descent to the latter through the larch trees in the first beauty of their early spring foliage was very fine indeed. The motors were joined at the entrance to the drive to Glendoll Lodge. As the hour was not convenient for ordering afternoon tea

at the Milton of Clova Inn we carried on to Kirriemuir, where we succeeded in getting into, or making, a traffic jam in the main square. However, in the absence of the Law, our expert got us out safely and he then tried to get a supply of bridies, as we were by now a bit hungry. All the shops were sold out, but finally he found a baker who was just proceeding to take a batch out of the oven, and he bought the necessary number. They were frightfully hot and we did our best, but the spectacle of the nine of us standing on the side-walk of one of the main streets in Thrums nibbling at the red-hot things was a sight for the gods. But the bridies were so good that we did not mind what the people thought. Then on to Aberdeen for supper. A great day.

On May 28, 1932, we climbed Lochnagar by way of the Blacksheil Burn and the steep north-west shoulder of the hill. Dense mist was entered at about 2,150 feet, and the summit was attained without any special trouble, although there were several patches of hard snow on the steeper parts of the slope. We then crossed the summit plateau and descended the Ladder, and did not emerge from the mist until we were a long way below the Fox's Well. Those members of the party who had not done an expedition before in thick mist were a bit impressed; at least the two men who led the party flattered themselves that such was the case. During the descent I happened to tell Mr Tawse that it was my forty-ninth ascent of Lochnagar, and he said at once, "Then we will come back in July and do your fiftieth." This was done a couple of months later by the same route, but in clear weather. The party now saw the nature of the north-west slope up which they had gone in thick mist on the former occasion, and some of them said that had they known what the slope was like they would not have gone up it.

In the schedule already mentioned, walk No. 26 was from Braemar to Inchrory, and in my explanation I stated, "No. 26. This is a snorter, and is for adepts only, with guide. Best done in a long day in June." We did it three times. On the first we had a very early start from Aberdeen and motored to Invercauld House. Then by way of the Slugan and Quoich to the Sneck, thick mist having been entered

some little time before we reached the latter. Then down the Slochd Burn to the bridge across the Avon, and thence to Inchrory to the cars which *were* there. Tea at Tomintoul and home to Aberdeen, which was reached pretty late—in fact, almost early. And that was that!

So the next year it was decided that we would do it again, but this time by night, and over the top of Ben Avon to see the sunrise. Quite! We left Aberdeen shortly after 7.30 P.M. on July 14, 1933, and drove to Invercauld House as before. We now saw that the conditions up aloft were far from good, and the stalker who joined us in a few minutes said that the weather was hopeless and advised us to go to the hotel for the night and start in the morning after breakfast. This we accordingly did, and after breakfast at six o'clock reached the Sneck in good time and in good weather as far as it was concerned; but there were thick clouds on the upper part of Ben Avon. As there was therefore no use in going up to the summit we decided to go down the Slochd by our former route. At first the view into the Garbh Coire was magnificent, but shortly—in fact, very shortly indeed—everything was blotted out by thick clouds and heavy rains. By the time that we reached the Avon we were drenched and the rain was still coming down in torrents. The river was in full flood, and the bridge which we had crossed the previous year had been conveniently washed away during the winter. To cross the river was impossible, although one of our members made the attempt and would have been washed away down stream if he had not been fortunate to catch on to a big boulder a little way out in the torrent. He was rescued in due course. We then walked down the rough ground on the right bank of the river and presently came to, and were trapped by, the Caol Ghleann Burn, which was also in full flood and impossible. So we had to walk up beside it for a full mile before we came to a place where we could cross in safety. The cars were joined at Inchrory, and Tomintoul was reached in due course. Here the hotel people placed four bathrooms and plenty of hot water at our disposal and gave us an excellent tea, the great feature of which was the "evening dress" of those members of the

party who did not have a change of clothes. Aberdeen was reached about midnight.

But we were not going to be beaten by Ben Avon, so the next year we tried again. We left Aberdeen on the afternoon of Friday, June 29, for Braemar, where we had a high tea. Got away about nine and reached the Sneck about midnight more or less; principally more, I think. One thing is perhaps worth mentioning: Mr Tawse and I left Alltdourie together well in advance of the rear party, who had been delayed. W. T. said that he would do it all right, but that I would have to give him plenty of rests. I replied that I would give him as many as he liked, but added that, after it became so dark that he could not see the details of the ground, he would not require any rests as he would simply go on automatically. This turned out to be the case, and he and I reached the Sneck well before the second party. We waited at the Sneck until about 2.30 A.M. and thus had plenty of time to admire the magnificent lighting effects of the Garbh Coire in the early dawn. The summit rocks of Ben Avon were reached in ample time for the sunrise, but unfortunately there were clouds on the north-eastern horizon and we did not see the sun until it was well up above the horizon. We now followed the main ridge of the mountain for miles and miles—in fact, for many more miles than some of the party had been bargaining for. At one place water was met and a brew of hot tea was served out by the man who considered, and now proved, that a spirit cooker could be used several times as against the once only of a thermos flask. As a matter of fact the cook had to use his cooker three times before the other men had had enough. Then on to Inchrory for the cars, breakfast at Tomintoul, and home to Aberdeen. It had been a great day, or rather a great night, done in perfect weather.

Alas, these pleasant days are now but a memory, as our dear friend William Tawse passed away from us very suddenly when being driven homewards from Banchory on Saturday, April 6. We miss him greatly.