

GATHERING THE FOREST.

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FOR many of us the war has meant the end of holidays. Particularly for those of us who live in the south, and are accustomed to identify holidays with the Highlands. Naturally we do not complain, although two years without the sight of a mountain or a breath of Highland air, when for twenty years or more we have not once missed the journey to the North, makes the ordinary privations of war seem of little account. But naturally also, since we cannot renew or add to them, we tend to fall back on our existing stock of memories, and with the aid of maps, photographs, old diaries, and notes of expeditions, to re-create the Highland atmosphere. Now, indeed, the virtue of the faithful diarist is rewarded! Not even a detailed set of photographs can recapture the magic of a long day on the hills so well as the notes written down on the spot, especially if the disappointments and moments of disillusion are as exactly recorded as the successes. The days which seemed at the time most arduous and least pleasant, turned by the alchemy of time into "something rich and strange," so often outshine, in length and intensity of memory, days which passed in pure pleasure and without untoward incident.

But it is fatal to trust to memory alone—memory, which tends ultimately to paint its pictures all in glowing or all in sombre colours, losing the light and shade of actual experience. In front of a good fire beside the tent or in the hotel lounge after a long day, I have often cursed the demands of my importunate diary, when all one asks is to be allowed to smoke the pipe of peace; but one knows that six months later the trouble will seem to have been well worth the taking; and at a time like this a diary comes into its own.

What sort of memories are most pleasurable when we have to be satisfied with memories alone? Personally, I find that it is not to the accounts of "epic" days that I turn in the old diaries. Not to the days on which I walked the clock round; trod half a dozen summits in that enchanting wilderness between An Teallach and Loch Maree; or, when still a novice in the art of route-finding, got benighted in the Lairig Ghru, to find myself by morning hopelessly entangled in the mazes of Rothiemurchus. Satisfying as these memories are, there is perhaps a little too much bitter in the bitter-sweetness of recalling them, and it is rather of the more intimate, less adventurous expeditions that I prefer to remind myself now. For instance, the leisurely climb to the shoulders of Ben Wyvis one broiling August day, and the view from the summit ridge of a sea of thick, low cloud, above which appeared the tip of Ben Dearg, a single sharp cone etched against the sky with the precision of a Japanese print, and seeming in its distance and isolation thousands of feet higher than the mere 3,547 of Munro's Tables and common sense. Or else my mind goes back to the very earliest days in the Highlands, to the first expedition of all, at the time a matter for much pride and satisfaction—the ascent of Craig Dhu from Newtonmore! Or again, a walk up Glen Feshie in the early dawn of a day of high summer. On this occasion there were no adventures, no records were attempted, much less broken, but the perfection of the day, the strong sunlight, the freshness of the air, the absolute stillness of the glen, broken only by the soft roaring of the river, the deep harmonizing colours of pine trees, heather, and foxgloves, combined to make up a richness of sensation and atmosphere which had about it something of the quality of great music.

But one expedition many years ago, in which hill climbing played only a secondary part, stands out as though it had happened yesterday. I was staying with a friend, a sheep farmer, in the high, rough country between the upper Spey and Loch Laggan. It was late October, and one evening my host declared for an early bed, since on the next day was to take place that great event in the year of the Highland sheep farmer—gathering the forest—driving the sheep down

from the mountains and high moors before winter sets in, preparatory to their journey to Lowland grazings nearer the coast. The acreage of a Highland sheep farm is often to all intents and purposes limitless. This farmhouse by the Spey commanded, besides its immediate surroundings and the moor east of the Drumlaggan road, which in itself would constitute a large farm in England, an enormous triangular wedge of moor and mountain with Dalwhinnie as its apex, the east shore of Loch Ericht and the main road as far as Dalnaspidal as its sides. Besides the familiar Boar of Badenoch and Sow of Atholl, this huge wilderness contains four not so well-known tops of over 3,000 feet, forming a roughly semicircular group, with its highest point in Ben Udlamain (3,306 feet), which faces Ben Alder across the deep trench of Loch Ericht. To beat this area systematically, beginning from the baseline of the triangle and driving the sheep so that they converged on the apex at Dalwhinnie, would obviously take time and good weather. It meant an early start, for the Highland day in October ends at 5 P.M. or sooner: and absence of mist was essential, since sheep on a hillside are difficult enough to see on a clear day. Unless they move, they are often indistinguishable from the granite boulders that litter the ground.

We were lucky. The air at 4.45 A.M. was claspingly cold when I crawled out of bed and dressed hurriedly by moonlight. At 5 A.M. we were in the car and on our way to Dalwhinnie. The moon was nearly full and still high in the sky, and shining through the frosty air lit up the Spey valley with a green, suffusing radiance. Huddled in the car I watched the contorted windings of the river, which here, although so high and so near its source, flows over a perfectly flat meadowland with sharp bends, "forgetting its bright speed," and looking more like the Ouse or the Isis than the rapid Spey, most dangerous of Highland rivers. The birchwoods by the roadside were a palette of gold, brown, and yellow, with here and there the vivid scarlet of the rowan or the cherry. Presently, after crossing the Truim, we turned south into the main road, and began the gentle 10-mile climb to Dalwhinnie. The main chain of the

Grampians, the hills of Atholl, came into sight; the view widened, and over the Cairngorms appeared the first light of morning. Unbelievably quickly and yet hardly perceptibly this first glow widened and brightened until by the time the car drew up at the head of Loch Ericht it was almost daylight although not yet 6 o'clock. The moon still shone palely on the flood-water below the dam, where grew, in the days before the Grampian Hydro-electric Scheme, the greenest grass in all Scotland—or England either. We got out of the car and walked stiffly down to the jetty, where quite a crowd was assembled. Close by was moored a large open rowing boat with an outboard motor. Into this we piled, a motley crew. My host and the neighbouring farmer, a dozen shepherds and something like a score of dogs, all in ceaseless movement. As usual there was a stiff breeze blowing up the loch; it was bitterly cold and the boat lay low in the water, affording no protection whatever against the gusts striking straight on to our bows and every minute or so driving an icy wave of spray from end to end of the heavily weighted craft. It was impossible to move, and one got steadily wetter and colder. But all sense of discomfort was lost in the magnificence of the prospect down the long, narrow fjord-like loch. Ericht is indeed one of the most impressive of the Highland lochs and much the largest for its height (1,160 feet) above sea-level. It is over 15 miles long, over 500 feet deep, and nowhere more than a mile or so wide. Over the upper reaches, indeed, its width is never more than half a mile, so that the hills seem to press down upon it and overshadow it. It is a small inland sea, hemmed in by steep cliffs—a vast funnel down which the wind blows from the open moor of Rannoch, so that even on the calmest days the water is stirred. As we rounded the bend past Loch Ericht Lodge the sun topped the lower hills to the east and shone directly on to the red screes of Ben Bheoil, which, from the bed of the loch, completely hides its loftier neighbour, Ben Alder. At 7 A.M., after a sail of some 10 miles, we landed at Coire Bhacaidh, and the day's work began.

There was no mist, the sky was clear, visibility good, and the temperature perfect for a long tramp. The stags were

roaring in the corrie as we set off, each man with his dogs, up the outlying slopes of Ben Udlamain, spreading out fanwise as we went, like a row of beaters, to cover the ground from the lochside to the watershed. It was stiff going, through thigh-deep heather, until we gained the ridge. On ledges on the walls of the corrie, inaccessible even to the dogs, we saw sheep that had run wild, dragging heavy fleeces unclipped for three seasons or more. How they survive the rigours of winter on these high moors one cannot say, but once strayed it is seldom that they are recaptured. There being no fences to prevent them, some sheep wander in the course of a summer into other grazing grounds, but, since they are marked, they are usually caught and sent home. My host informed me that he had had sheep returned to him in this way from as far distant as Gorton on Rannoch Moor. The Ben Udlamain-Geal Charn ridge is a difficult one to follow in bad weather owing to its lack of distinctive features. Even on a clear day such as this care is necessary for an inexperienced party. The older editions of the O.S. 1-inch map are confusing, and at one or two points distinctly inaccurate. On this occasion, however, I was in the fortunate position of being able to forget about route-finding and give my attention wholly to the magnificent views which opened out, particularly to the west. Far below us Loch Pattack lay shining in the sun like a silver plate. South of it, out of an expanse of level moor, rose the mighty bastions of Ben Alder, and beyond an unparalleled array of great peaks, culminating far to the west in Ben Nevis itself. At our feet stretched Loch Ericht, and in the narrow strip of flat birchwood beside the water we could see the steadily growing stream of sheep driven in from the lower slopes of the mountain. From our point of vantage, nearly 2,000 feet above them, they looked like grains of spilt salt shaken together on a green tablecloth. Meanwhile the flock gathered from the upper ridges, with which we were directly concerned, though smaller, was also increasing, and care had to be taken to keep it away from the cliffs. For every mile we walked the dogs must have covered two or three, disappearing into hollows on the hillside or dipping over the

far side of the ridge to head off stragglers and bring in reluctant individuals hiding behind rocks or camouflaged against outcrops of white scree. By the time Fraoch Corrie was reached, two considerable flocks had been gathered. Here, at 11 A.M., we stopped for sandwiches, sitting on stones by the burnside. Then followed another pull from the Marconaich col nearly to the summit cairn of Geal Charn, a rough trek above the cliffs of Creag Dhubh, and a slow descent down the long, swampy nose of Creagan Mòr, the pace getting slower as the flock increased in size. At length, after several checks and a descent into a precipitous gully to rescue a fallen ewe, the two main flocks united in the flat ground at the bottom of the hill, and the many hundreds of sheep were securely penned in the fangs by the lochside. From here they were to be driven to Dalwhinnie the next day and put on the train. It was now 4.30 P.M. and daylight was already fading. In our necessarily zigzag course we had covered quite twice the crow-flight distance from our starting-point. We sat down to an excellent dinner in a cottage belonging to one of the shepherds, and half an hour later were speeding in the car on our way back to the farm. As we had left, so we returned in the dark. In the intervening hours I had seen something of the Highlands with the eyes of those who live and work there. The walking and climbing powers of the Highland shepherd seem inexhaustible. Of course this was an easy day for a shepherd, accustomed as he is to be on the hill at literally any hour in all weathers and at all seasons of the year. But this was my first real acquaintance with him, and perhaps for this reason more than others, the day remains memorable. He is practically the sole survivor of a race whose life if hard and lacking in "amenities" was, nevertheless, to judge from its folklore, poetry, and music, not without values unknown to a commercial age. Strangely enough, the more barren and comfortless the soil, the more it is cherished by its inhabitants. Odysseus prized the rugged Ithaca above all other lands, and love of native soil has nowhere flourished so intensely as in poor, mountainous countries; in ancient (and modern) Greece and in the Highlands of Scotland.

But the history of the Highlands for the last 200 years is one of almost unrelieved gloom. By those at least who look upon the Highlands as something more than a national playground or an object for commercial exploitation it is to be hoped that in the period of reconstruction which must follow this war their interests will not be forgotten.

