

SYMPHONY.

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WHEN war conditions caused me to curtail my summer vacation and abandon a contemplated return visit to the Cuillin I had to content myself with revisiting some well-loved haunts in the Cairngorms. And I comforted myself by dipping into my store of recollections and by comparing the sensations and impressions aroused during wanderings in the Cairngorms and the Cuillin. In the following random notes I have endeavoured to give expression to these thoughts and something of what the hills mean to me. The hills produce indescribable effects on one's mind and spirit, effects that are not fleeting but imperishable.

But before I dip into the treasure-chest of recollections and almost forgotten happenings I would like to record a rather curious experience I had after my return from a stay in Aviemore in August of 1940. With two companions I had put in a long, glorious day on Cairngorm and Ben Macdhui, with a visit to Loch Avon and the Shelter Stone. On both summits we had encountered a gale and bitter cold, with a clammy mist, but at Loch Avon and the Shelter Stone conditions were ideal. Our descent to the loch was by Coire Raibeirt whose ruddy rocks were warm with sunshine and whose stream was lively and sparkling. Loch Avon was intensely blue and scintillating; the heather, a tide of delicate purple, washed over the lower slopes and down to the water edge; the great rock faces soared up into a cloud-flecked blue sky, and the distant rush of the Féith Buidhe and Garbh Uisge filled the corrie with music. Four days after, I attended an organ recital in St Machar Cathedral in Aberdeen. The church was dim and soothing and the music flowed in enfolding melody. After the first two or three bars of Bach's Choral Prelude, "In Thee is Bliss,"

the dim walls of the cathedral seemed to recede and I found myself, with my two companions, back among the softly glowing heather above Loch Avon, in warm sunshine, with a sensation of spaciousness, the loch blue and sparkling, and the soft music of wind and water filling the corrie. When the last notes of the Prelude died away the vision faded and the cathedral walls closed in, and it was a minute or two before I realised where I was. I have still to hear that Prelude!

The Loch Avon corrie is thronged with the ghosts of brave days whose voices echo in the memory and crowd round trying to attract attention, but it is difficult to select, so insistent are they. My first visit to Loch Avon was on a dismal rain-filled day in July 1904. We had come out of the mist-choked Lairig an Laoigh from Derry and floundered through the sodden peat hags and moraines round the base of Beinn Mheadhoin. The sullen water, gloomy and leaden under the low-pressing mist, with nothing but rain-laced, grey vapour hiding unknown country beyond, gave me a feeling of unreality and despair as well as of awe and apprehension. Above the sound of our squelching progress, wet to the skin, there came a whisper of wind and the elusive hush of falling water. There was a sensation of something sinister and oppressive. Now that I have come to know the corrie well, mostly during bad weather, the feeling of sinister oppression is gone. In its place is a curious detachment, expectant, as if my other self were lifted up into the mist seeing the hidden grimness and beauties within it.

Storms in this great corrie are experiences deeply engraved. One July day my brother and I were coming off Cairngorm by Coire Raibeirt, fighting every foot against a ravening gale. We were benumbed and soaked, and crouched for a few minutes in the meagre shelter of a boulder below the crags above the loch. The whole corrie was filled with a grey curtain of lashing rain that drove along on a roaring, bellowing wind. The loch surface was a tempestuous sea of racing, leaping white waves, and we could dimly see them breaking in fury on the sandy shore at the loch outlet. The Féith Buidhe slabs were covered completely with roaring

white water, and the Garbh Uisge was one huge waterfall ; from the crags and precipices, even above the bellow of the gale, came eerie shrieks and a deep booming diapason as the pressure of the wind tore through the gullies and crevices. A feeling of exultation at being privileged to witness such a display, and of awe at the fury and grandeur completely transcended the knowledge that, somehow or other, we had to cross the Féith Buidhe as it raged through Maghan na Banaraich so that we might reach the Shelter Stone! That was a task that occupied us some considerable time!

But when one looks upon Loch Avon gently rippled on a day of sunshine and warm air, framed in a pageant of colour, with a myriad of wind whispers stirring in the grass and heather, one's whole being is filled with that deep contentment which comes with the touch of something well-loved, as if new life is absorbed from the mere sight of it. On such a day, viewed from a high perch on the water-smoothed rock of the Féith Buidhe, this deep blue treasure in its lovely cradle lifts one up into a world of fancy and longing.

Loch Etchachan, under any conditions, is one of the loveliest places in the Cairngorm massif. In wet conditions, such as one gets in the high places, many people might have another opinion, but for some elusive reason this high-lying loch, even in wild weather, when the surroundings are completely hidden by cloud, is fascinating. When I come upon it from the corrie below, or across from Loch Avon, there is a distinct feeling of spaciousness, of freedom, and comfort, and the shores appear to be glowing with soft colour. Many an hour I have spent in the lee of a boulder, thoroughly wet, near the water edge, listening to the slap and rush of the waves beating against the stones, and the faint musical notes drifting down from the rocks above. In spite of the discomfort there is a feeling of being home.

Nights spent under the stars by the shore of this loch were like being in another world, surrounded by invisible presences whose voices whispered comfort and peace. On such nights it seemed a waste of time to be under cover. Moonlight had almost washed out the sparkle of the accumulating stars ;

the water lapped softly, and the flood of night had silenced the wind whispers. There was a peace so soothingly oppressive that it brought tears to the eyes, and we imagined the mountains lived and breathed, and sensed the awe that issues from the great hills.

I have often wondered what are the thoughts of the great company who, on their way through the Lairig, in most cases, wearily skirt the Pools of Dee. During the many times I have sat by their crystal-clear water, on two occasions only has a bright day favoured me. Then the screens glowed with colour and the soft splash of the March Burn was music. A feeling of great contentment lulled me and spoken word seemed desecration. As a contrast, a day of gale, laden with cold rain or sleet, surrounded one with a confused babel of roaring and eerie wailings as mist was rent by the shattered rocks above, but somehow there was a feeling of satisfaction and elation.

Winter days, especially during wild weather, are indelibly engraved in memory. On these ventures one's thoughts are so fully occupied with the work of battling against the elements that sensations are not clearly registered. But even during the stress of effort one can take the time, if so inclined, to look around for something to relieve the strain. I remember once, during a Club excursion in 1936 when the ascent of Lochnagar was attempted from Ballochbuie, having the task of taking down two of the company into the Forest again. It was a day of heavy mist and wind-blown fine snow, and as I mounted up again to rejoin the company, solitary in the blinding obscurity, I had a buoyant feeling of elation, and now and again stood up to watch the fine dry snow being carved by invisible tools into tiny cornices, plumes, and fantastic flowing designs. I had no apprehension at being isolated in that whirling, white, dim world.

One sees rather curious things during a stormy winter day. On the wind-polished snow above the headwaters of the Glas-allt, which flows into Loch Muick, we watched for a few minutes the energetic hurrying of a soft green caterpillar, one of the Tipulids, as it bored into the wind. Near the same spot that day we heard a series of loud claps just

like those given by pigeons when they commence flight, and looking in the direction of the sound saw bearing down upon us a rapidly whirling pillar of snow which enveloped us in a blinding cloud of fine powder. My first impression was one of apprehension that I would be lifted up, and, even though I weigh fifteen stones, there was a distinct suction upwards as the "snow-devil" swept over!

Of the brilliant winter days there is one that will ever keep its radiance. Lochnagar was under deep snow, but the surface was encrusted with what I can only describe as a carpet of frozen feathers. Mist was entered at the Fox's Well, but as the ascent was made by the ice-encrusted boulders at the corrie edge, thin bright lances of sunlight pierced downwards. Gradually the mist sank silently into the corrie, curdling into a pearly rosy grey cloud that lay stretched like a floor from rim to rim of horizon. Slowly and silently through it rose the ice-covered cliffs, brilliantly sunlit, glittering, majestic, beautifully cruel. Above was a cloudless blue sky; a spell had been laid upon the wind so that it slept, and there was a listening silence. All that was seen of the rest of Scotland was the upper half of the Cairngorm massif, glittering white against a blue sky, and the Spectre of the Brocken moved on the cloud floor far below us.

Hours of darkness spent on the summits are moments in life when closeness to Nature makes one introspective, and the hills appear more intimate. It has been my good fortune to spend many nights on the Cairngorm summits with and without the moral support of the shelter of a tent, and the experiences are things to be cherished, even on occasions when weather conditions were by no means comfortable. The airy peak of Lochnagar on a night of wind laden with cold rain or sleet is a place on which few would care to spend the hours of darkness, but to do so is an experience not readily forgotten. The summit rocks appear to offer shelter from the elements, but it is a delusion, for I have never yet had the satisfaction of securing immunity from the demons that whoop and snarl round their smoothed surfaces and search into the nooks we fondly hoped would protect us. A feeling

of isolation and a sensation of airy height always accompany any vigil I have had on this peak in wet, boisterous darkness, and I fancy I hear demoniac laughter and hoarse voices chanting. The curious thing is that the only other tops on which I have experienced these sensations under similar conditions are Ben Avon and Beinn Mheadhoin, where the nights were spent in niches in the summit rocks. On the broader summits the feeling of height is absent and isolation does not appear so complete. To be aloft on Cac Càrn Beag on a calm, mild night of clear, full moon, with a sea of pearly cloud less than a hundred feet below stretching as far as the eye could reach is a privilege not readily forgotten. Such good fortune was given me in June last year. The pearly grey cloud below was gently ruffled and glowed softly in the bright moonlight with blushes of rose, lavender, and pale gold. An elusive whisper of water filtered up from the Sandy Loch corrie, accentuating the silence. Peace and awe enfolded me, and I was very near the boundary of Heaven.

Before I first penetrated into the recesses of the savage Cuillin of Skye and sat up on their shattered peaks and ridges, I had frequently wondered what my reactions would be to such a contrast to the great broad backs of the Cairngorm giants. I have never quite fathomed what prompted me to forsake for a time the familiar granite for the sinister volcanic battlements in Eilean a' Cheo. Perhaps it was because my father had climbed there, or that I was carrying out as a kind of pilgrimage an abandoned plan of two or three years before. Skye is a mystic isle, shrouded with legendary tales of fair women and great heroes, and in such an atmosphere of glamour and romance it is quite likely that one's sensations would be in tune with it. And so I found it.

I well remember the first day I had under the shadow of the Cuillin. It was in August 1935, and I left Sligachan and trudged up the glen and into Harta Coire. From the tawny moors the grim peak of Sgùrr nan Gillean seemed to leap up into a gently moving grey canopy, and in the glen was the soft sound of water and the plaintive cry of a bird.

Often I halted and looked across the colourful moors and lower slopes to the sweeping ridge, shattered and pinnacled, that culminated in the airy summit. Then, as always since, the Cuillin seemed unreal, faerie, aloof, austere, yet overwhelmingly near. I found myself trying to walk quietly, as if I feared to awake some slumbering demons or spirits. I was humbled by the overpowering loom of forbidding watered rock that had a peculiar velvety appearance and whose colours, so soft and deep and rich, changed imperceptibly from dark grey to plum, then to grey-green and violet-blue.

To really sense the power of the Cuillin one has to be in the closest contact with them, to grasp them in outstretched arms, lean on their riven rock, to be enveloped in their dense mists, and saturated by their clear waters. In blue soft days they are full of peace, but when the Atlantic gales shriek and whoop in the corries and tear across the peaks and ridges the hounds of Cuchuillin seem to be let loose.

So many memorable days have been lived among the rock-encircled corries and on the shattered crests of the Cuillin that I cannot do more than indicate in a very inadequate way their effect upon me. It was a great thrill to scramble up the great expanses of boiler-plates, smoothly flowing and rounded, and come out on the skyline among riven and shattered pinnacles and battlements soaring giddily up from seemingly unclimbable faces. The rock was so black and grim that it gave me a sense of unreality, and in some instances oppression tempered with apprehension. But acquaintance lulled all that to some extent, and even yet when I grasp the roughness and feel the comforting safe grip of boot nails, I am conscious of a sinister brooding that is inexplicable.

Visitors to Skye usually make a pilgrimage to Loch Coruisk, and of course I had to view this gloomy cauldron. My first view of it was one dull, depressing day, with occasional fine drizzle, from high up on Sgùrr na Stri. Frankly, I was disappointed! The water of the loch was dead and leaden, the rock faces surrounding it were of a dull blue-black colour, featureless and uninteresting, and cloud was low.

It was certainly a depressing, gloomy place, a haunt of evil spirits, but I felt cheated. I do not know what I expected to find, but I do know that my watch stopped early in the day and refused to go during the remainder of my stay on the island!

My second visit was made a day or two later. A gale swept down Glen Sligachan carrying with it what appeared to be half the Atlantic, and I well remember how our Hon. President, Dr Collie, who was staying at Sligachan, advised me not to venture as conditions were much too violent. However, youth will have its way, though several times during the fight up Glen Sligachan I thought how foolhardy I was to pit myself against the fury that ravened, snarling and tearing, down the glen. When I got to the crest of Druim Hain the wind pressure was so great that to make any progress I had to crawl on hands and knees till the downward slope commenced. All the way down to the shore of Loch Coruisk by way of Loch a' Choire Riabhaich and the roaring stream running from it I had to fight every foot against wind pressure and lashing rain. But through it all I experienced a sensation of elation and thorough enjoyment, and was astonished when I realised I was endeavouring to raise my voice in the words of the 124th Psalm to the tune "Old 124th"! Coruisk was worth seeing and hearing! What I could see of it was a mass of roaring white waves sweeping in fiendish fury against the rocky shore, the spray being lifted off like clouds of smoke. The rain came in from the Atlantic almost horizontally and had a distinctly salty taste; the surrounding rock faces were completely hidden in a grey, watery curtain, but from them came the wail and shriek of tortured and enraged spirits.

Only once have I been down at Coruisk in sunshine. Descending from the rocks of Sgùrr na Stri with two companions I had the misfortune to twist an ankle rather badly. For a few minutes I was sweating with pain, but while I was wondering how I was to get back to Sligachan I found myself thinking how beautiful and colourful the great corrie was and how fortunate we were to see it under these conditions. The loch was blue and sparkling; the vegetation

was freshly green and touched with gold and russet; the great cliffs soared enticingly, patterned with colour and shadow, up to a serrated edge clear against a washed blue sky. There was peace and a great awe, and we were reluctant to speak lest we be overheard.

Incidentally, I prevented my ankle swelling by keeping on my boot, and returned to Sligachan in sudden mist and rain, by way of Druim nan Ramh and the upper end of Harta Coire.

Days on Druim nan Ramh, that great, massive, ribbed crest towering to the north above Coruisk, are not readily forgotten. My first acquaintance with this magnificent gem was on a day of fitful sunshine through lacy mist lazily trailing caressingly across the watered faces. It was warm and calm, and I had settled myself in a niche on a grassy ledge near the skyline looking down on the rippled water. The air was at rest; a faint whisper of falling water eddied across from Meall na Cuilce and Sgùrr Dubh Beag, whose wet rocks gleamed like silver. The stillness was stifling, and the distant faint croak of a raven emphasised the silence. I felt so insignificant, so unimportant, perched so high up, a speck of dust in the immensity, quite incapable of taking in the magnificence and solemnity of the great, brooding amphitheatre in whose depths ghostly shapes seemed to lurk. The only sign of life was a beautiful brown butterfly, with black-spotted wings aspread, at rest on the warm rock beside me.

Harta Coire, where a bloody fight between Macleods and Macdonalds was waged long long ago, attracted me in a strange way. Many an hour I spent in its echoing recesses, in fair weather and in foul, hoping, perhaps, to hear the clash of arms and shouts of battling clansmen about the Bloody Stone round which the fight was fiercest. Harta Coire curls round the spreading base of Sgùrr na h-Uamha, and at its upper end is barred by a high rock sill above which lies Lota Coire hemmed round by the great walls of Sgùrr Beag, Sgùrr nan Gilleann, and Bruach na Frithe. The exit from this corrie is sentinelled by the sinister Bhasteir Tooth, which frowns down from the crest. I had often looked down into Lota, but never passed through it until

one never-to-be-forgotten day when a young lady and I had come up into Harta Coire from Sligachan with the mist close and dense and rain incessant. We were to attempt the passage of Lota Coire to the crest above, and neither of us had any idea of what was before us. All went well till we arrived at the rock sill over which the stream spread itself in white flood. So close and thick was the mist that visibility was restricted to a few feet. We could see no easy way up, so decided to follow the stream as much as possible. The face over which the white water poured was unclimbable, but a way was found up the rock on our right, though at one point we climbed up through the falling water. During the climb my constant thought was the hope that we would not have to come back the same way! With great relief we surmounted the obstacle and stood on the floor of Lota Coire. Around, the dense grey vapour pressed close, rain fell in torrents, and the wind tore at us. From all sides came the sibilant hiss of innumerable streams pouring off the cliffs. We were drenched, and the contents of our rucksacks sodden. Curiously enough, in spite of my anxiety as to what was ahead, my sensations were those of elation and abandon. The remainder of the ascent was easier than expected; in fact there was no difficulty, and when we got under the streaming black rocks of Sgùrr an Fionn Coire the mist rent above us for a few seconds and we got a heartening glimpse of the Bhasteir Tooth, which from that point presented a cheering likeness to the profile of our Hon. President! As we topped the crest it seemed as if the demons of the peaks were enraged at our success, for the gale roared and snarled round us with increased fury, the rain-harried rock rasped, and now and again a fragment from aloft crashed down to the scree below. After the roughness of Lota Coire our descent through Fionn Coire was a pleasure in spite of its wetness, but as we lost height the wind died and the rain ceased, and after crossing the Allt Mòr an Fhionn-choire near the track to Sligachan from Bealach a' Mhaim with the current well over our knees, we looked back in evening sunshine up to where the peaks were enveloped in black cloud with rain showers passing across the lower slopes. The

expedition was one that taxed one's endurance and patience, but it was made all the more enjoyable by the uncomplaining cheerfulness of my companion who now and again broke into song with great vigour! Two or three days later a return visit revealed a perfectly easy route whereby the rock sill was surmounted.

My last climbing day in Skye was a fitting end to a glorious spell among the Cuillin. My companion of the Lota Coire adventure and I had spent a long day in a pageant of colour in Coire na Creiche, exploring among the rocks of Coire Tairneilear and among the Fairy Pools in Allt Coir' a' Mhadaidh. Our day was over, and we were lying in the warm sunshine, among the softly coloured heather and russet grass, gazing up towards the lovely peaks bathed in golden light, the shadows of clouds drifting over them taking on strange shapes and forms. No sound was heard but the soft lisp of water, the whispering of little wandering winds among the grass and heather, and the soft call of a raven. There was a wonder and an unearthly glory about that evening light with the sky radiant with the magic of sapphire, gold, rose, and emerald. I was lost in contemplation, and was brought to earth again by my companion asking what I was whistling. I was not conscious of whistling, but, after adjusting myself to the fact that I was really in Coire na Creiche, said I had not yet given it a name! I had been so played upon by the magic beauty of the treasures around me that chords had been touched and the vibrations were taking form. And so came to life an air we called "Coire na Creiche," and in course of time I put together two verses:—

Oh, Bruach na Frithe looms high o'er the corrie
All russet and gold in the westerling glow.
The Pools of the Fairies are blue in the sunlight;
The red of the rowan is mirrored below.
Coire na Creiche.

The peaks are aflame in the fire of the sunset;
The shadows are grey in the corries below.
The song of the waters is hushed into silence;
The call of the raven comes softly and low.
Coire na Creiche.

And so with these thoughts I comforted myself when holiday plans were nebulous and fleeting. I could still sense the deep silence of the hills, see the mists lift and drift away, revealing the wonders and glories, and watch the grey spin and scatter of a rain-threaded afterglow. As these thoughts lightened the anxieties of the uncertain days in which we live, the words of an unknown writer often came to me:—

“The freedom of the open air be yours to know and love,
With friendliness around you and the windy heavens above;
Not treading easy paving stones for ever and a day,
But may you have the will to go the rougher, lovelier way.”

