

THE STAG ERRANT: A BEDTIME STORY

D. L. MACKAY

My story goes back some years, but that is of no moment, because the hills are timeless and steadfast, the same to-day, now and forever. I hadn't been long bitten by the bug of hill climbing and walking, and had one ambition—to spend a week-end in the hills, quite alone, and really absorb the perennial joy of my beloved Cairngorms. Although I had previously spent nights on the high tops in club company, on this occasion discretion became the better part of valour, and I decided to spend both nights under cover at the Luibeg bothy and to make an early start for the high tops in the morning.

At that time Luibeg cottage was uninhabited, but there was a keeper living at Derry Lodge a short distance away. He had only recently come to the Cairngorms, being formerly a lowland keeper, and, as such, was not regarded by the highland keepers as being in the same class at all. But he was a good friend to me, although given very much to macabre humour, as you will hear.

He was aware of my impending arrival, and, as I expected to be late getting in the first night, I told him not to wait up for me but to leave the door of Luibeg unlocked.

I arrived at Braemar at sunset on the evening in question and lost no time in setting my feet in rhythmic motion for the ten mile tramp to Derry. It was a still tranquil evening but the shadows were lengthening rapidly. Soon after Inverey I fell in with a companion who accompanied me to the Derry gate where the 4 mile path by the side of the Lui wound its upward way to Derry. Just as we were about to go our separate ways the silence of the now starlit night was broken by the terrifying roaring of the rutting deer. To hear these roars in the dark of the night is to remember them for ever. My companion made one remark, "Nice company you are going to have," and vanished into the shadows. How prophetic his words I didn't know at that time.

I shall never forget the sheer delight of that slowly ascending tramp through the velvet starry night of late autumn; my ears attuned to all the little noises and rustlings in the dark, the vibrant silence shattered at intervals with the thundering roars. My eyes had become accustomed to the darkness and I could distinguish the

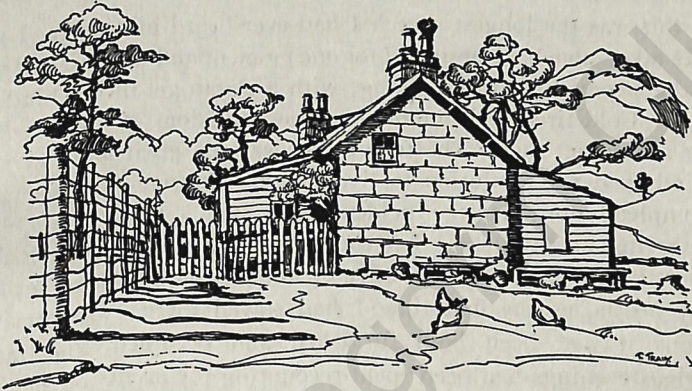
landmarks. Once or twice I saw the deer silhouetted on the skyline as the horizon lightened and then closed down again.

The keeper—let us call him Jock—was waiting for me at Derry and took me to Luibeg cottage where I found a blazing wood fire, and upstairs a pile of soft clean straw for my bed. He had laid in a stock of wood. I had food in my rucksack, warm clothes, a fire and a bed—my cup was full. Perhaps my conscience did prick a little—had I not intended to “rough it”? Still this was a beginning, perhaps next time I would be a little more Spartan. But I didn’t know what was coming to me; for all the use that bed was, I might as well have been tramping all night in the corries. Jock bade me good night and said he would look in in the morning to see if I had slept. I thought he emphasised “slept” a little, but did not heed at the time. I promised to let him know my itinerary for the next day “just in case,” and closed the door on my exquisite aloneness.

He could hardly have reached Derry before it started. The silence was shattered by the now familiar rutting roar, but so near the cottage the windows almost rattled. I peered through the window but could see nothing in the dark. Again it came, and again and again. Round and round the house the noise seemed to be moving, always close at hand, never any farther away. Why doesn’t he move off, I wondered. Rutting stags don’t stay down at habitations at this time of the year. However, I was not sufficiently brave to go out to investigate, so after a picnic supper went upstairs to settle down to sleep. Sleep! That roar would waken the dead.

All night long with resounding, monotonous regularity it went on. I quite soon gave up all attempts to sleep, and went downstairs again where I relit the fire. A comfortable looking chair left behind as wreckage by the previous tenants would serve as my resting-place for the rest of the night. But the comfortable look was only a snare and a delusion. Never before had I realised I had so many bone projections. Tending the wood fire to keep off the cold and chill of the early morning hours kept me occupied whilst the roars went on ceaselessly. When the first faint tinge of dawn began to peep through the window, I decided to wait another half hour before beginning breakfast and preparations for the day’s climb. That half hour was my undoing. I fell asleep in the uncomfortable chair. When I awoke it was full day and perfect silence reigned. Alarmed and angry with myself I hastily set about making up for this loss of time, but it was already 8.30 and my plans to leave at 7 were beyond redeeming.

A glance out of the window showed me Jock approaching. I was still angry with myself, and in answer to his cheery "Good morning, did ye sleep weel?" I merely said I had unfortunately "slept in" and gave no indication whatever of my troubled night. I was sufficiently irritable to want neither scorn nor sympathy; I couldn't make out from his slightly sardonic expression which of these I should get. "See you when you get down," he said, "and see and tak care o' yersel'." With that he strode off.



It was a glorious day as I started up Glen Lui, and very soon my anger and bad temper wore off. Who could stay surly for long in such surroundings of sheer joy. The deep blue of the sky with wispy white clouds scudding across; the browns and reds of the dying heather and the green of the moss against the dark splash of the summit rocks. Of my itinerary of the day I will be very brief, for, after all, this is just a stag story. I had hoped to follow Devil's Point by the long traverse to the summit of Cairn Toul, but my late start rather put the summit of Cairn Toul out of the question as I had promised Jock to be down before dark. Consequently after ascending Devil's Point I crossed the top of Coire Odhar and had a very pleasant saunter along the ridge towards the summit of Cairn Toul. Working on the time principle I reluctantly turned when just short of a mile from the cairn. Returning via Coire Odhar to the Corrour Bothy I found my descent had been very rapid and I would have time on my hands after all. Although I had done Cairn Toul on previous excursions in company, I instantly regretted not making the top on this, my lone expedition.

Darkness was just falling when I arrived at Luibeg after a very leisurely descent. This time no blazing fire awaited me, and as I set

about kindling it, footsteps sounded on the threshold. There stood Jock and the following conversation ensued.

"I see ye're doon, lassie."

"Yes," I agreed "I've had a lovely day."

But I didn't enthuse much because I was still regretting my lost top.

"Niver min' the fire, lassie, come awa o'er tae the lodge. Ma niece wha keeps hoose for me has got a bed for ye. She disna' like ye biding here."

As this was the longest speech I had ever heard him make, I was slightly taken aback. I hesitated for one moment and was lost. It was quite the wrong time to be strong, with a Satan-get-thee-behind-me attitude. Cold tired and hungry I had swift visions of a hot cooked supper and a soft bed. The temptation was too great and away on the wind sped my resolution to live rough. Strange as it seems, I had completely forgotten the incident of the stag.

Gathering up my gear I left the little cottage. As Jock locked the door, I stood gazing at the scene of so many happy hours, for this was by no means the first time I had stayed there. On previous occasions it had been both furnished and occupied, and many uproarious evenings had been spent recounting the events of the day. But this was the first time I had seen it empty and deserted, and I felt a little as though the heart had gone out of it. The little stone building was only dimly visible now in the gathering darkness, with its outhouse alongside and the little patch of rough grass beside it enclosed by a high stockade, where, I suppose, at one time the keeper had kept his cow, pony or goats, well protected by the high wire fence from foxes, deer or other marauding creatures.

The meal over and chairs drawn up before the blazing fire, Jock surveyed me with a slightly rheumy eye. "So you had a guid nicht. Did you no hear the bit staggy?"

Instantly recollection sprang upon me, and I confessed about my lively night. Could he explain the phenomenon, I inquired. A slow grin spread over his face, and the devilish gleam in his eye so startled me that I was glad of the presence of his niece. After a pause he said, "When I was doon lichting yer fire there was a stag inside the fence. Och, lassie, I thocht ye might be likin' company so I jest shut the gate and left him in. I let him oot in the morn afore ye was up."

Needless to say I forgave him because the tea was good, and I did have a warm soft bed that night.