

AN ARCTIC SUMMER DAY ON CAIRN TOUL.

BY JOHN GORDON, M.D.

AN ascent of Cairn Toul in the last week of May does not seem to offer any spice of danger to those who love a day on the hills. But it is the unexpected that happens in hill work as in other things, and so this faint sketch of our day's enjoyment may not be without interest. We had our quarters the previous night at Boat of Garten, making an early morning start for Loch Eunach. The air as we drove along was crisp, cool, and exhilarating, filled with the perfume of birch, larch, and pine. The wind came from the north and carried with it passing sleet showers. These were of short duration; close behind them laughed the sunshine. Thus we were decoyed on, hoping that Lamond Howie's camera might find its congenial work. For a time the clouds were lofty enough to allow the higher hills to be seen. The drive along the Bennie was charming; the stream was in full force, "foaming brown with double speed" past the lovely Scottish firs that stand sentinel-like in the glen. The tall, green junipers were a wonder to us; and we caught peeps of herds of deer watching from the undergrowth of the forest. Flowers were few; we only noticed blue patches of the dog violet, or the yellow streaks of the petty whin, and some vetches, but the brown on many of the birches told of the killing touch of frost.

Loch Eunach was reached about ten o'clock, and the needful preparations for the ascent at once made. M'Hardy and the writer led off—Lamond Howie and M'Connochie leisurely following with rucksack, camera, and "Jack". (Alas for the camera! it was not visible again that day.) The view of Sgòran Dubh from the loch shieling was wildly alpine at this time. This black jagged series of precipices had caught the flying clouds, entangling them on its peaks and scarred sides. The upper reaches of the precipices were quite snow-covered, while streaks of white serpentine down the almost inky black of the rocks to about 500 feet above the level of the loch. It was wonderful to watch the magni-

fying power of the mist on these peaks; when in cloud-land they looked gigantic, and their vague, shifting, undefined outlines, that we caught peeps of high up in air, seemed to stretch away and beyond into a mysterious region. We found snow plentiful 700 feet above the loch, the deer-stalkers' path only now and then visible. Approaching Coire Goundle, the sun, which was shining, began to get obscured; we looked backwards in time to see the valley taking on its storm-gloom. The glimpse lasted only a minute or two, but it was exceedingly vivid. The near end of the glen, which still contained the sunlight, showed in wonderful freshness and clearness the lower ridges of the encircling hills clad in their winter colours of blacks, browns, fawns, grays, and greens, and higher up their white snow robes. In a trice, like a racer, the snow-storm chased up the valley, peppering us with white spray. And then the glen was full of black gray mists and storm-clouds—we were in the midst of the gale. In ten minutes the sun was shining serenely.

We made our way to a great snow-slope in the corrie. It did not offer special difficulties, and with an hour's work at step-cutting we were really blown out of the last few feet of it by another wild storm, which stung hands and face. This snow was nearly all in capital condition for step-cutting, and lay at an angle of from 36° to 43° . The steepest part looked at times almost perpendicular, and it was no consolation to see that the slope did not shade away in snow, but abruptly stopped on rock and stones. An angle of 43° is distinctly steep for a snow-slope; Whympers pointed out that snow cannot really lie on the hill side at an angle beyond 45° . We had in our occupation of step-cutting several varieties of climate—sunshine and snow, wind-storm, mist, and half-veiled light. And whenever we tired of step-cutting we could always look back at the glorious summits of Sgòran Dubh, tossing the storm-clouds round their heads, and dragging them into their corries and gullies—anon their white peaks bravely shining into the blue. Our four-footed mountaineer made sagacious use of the steps, and followed with confidence, albeit with care and deliberation; it was most interesting to note the patient

watchfulness of the collie clinging close to his snow-clad master.

Half-way across the snow-slope, while the sun was somewhat obscured, but was still sending a considerable intensity of light, we observed a strange phenomenon. On the side of our body next the snow-slope there was a nimbus of violet light, which clung to clothes, naked fingers, and the shaft of the ice-axe. So plentiful did it appear in the palm of the hand that it looked at times like a pool of violet ink, and one thought it could be pitched away. On shaking the hand, however, the nimbus clung, and was not to be removed. Occasionally the colour varied, taking on shades of brownish yellow and blue, but violet was the most marked colour. At another time, in much the same condition of light and snow surroundings, one of the party, who was very proud of the beauty of the silver case of his compass, was disgusted to find that it had a distinctly yellow, pinchbeck look. This light refraction or polarisation was not so evident to some of the party, but the writer has observed it before in similar circumstances and atmospheric conditions.

Out of the step-cutting, we made, under the directions of our leader, for the 3750 feet level. This we did in an ever-increasing tempest, with mist and snow. Only at rare intervals were we gifted with a rift in the storm, when we saw the snow-clad hill tops upthronging all around. We kept an easterly direction by compass, no help being afforded by known objects. Much of the snow we passed over had fallen very recently. It was shifty, and did not bear our weight, and progress therefore was slow and tedious. In addition to the yielding snow we were bombarded by the gale, so that our outlook was not only narrowed, but, from the hail and snow, painful. In a momentary lull we endeavoured, about one o'clock, to take lunch in a hollow between two snow ridges, but no sooner had we squatted above our spotless white napery of snow than the fury of the elements increased so tremendously that we had to give up the attempt, and proceed on our journey. We were now fairly in the centre of the storm—
—the glass fell, as we soon discovered (we carried no fewer

than three aneroids—all accurate instruments) *a quarter of an inch* beyond the fall due to altitude—and as we were surmounting Sgòr an Lochain Uaine (“Angel’s Peak”) we temporarily mistook it for the summit of Cairn Toul itself. Here the intensity of the wind increased to such an extent that we found it quite impossible to *stand* against its fury except by leaning on our axes with legs outspread. One of the party, who incautiously allowed the maddened wind to enter the folds of his waterproof, was hurled along a good few yards before he could stop. Dimly looming through half-cleared-up clouds, we could catch glimpses of Braeriach and Ben Muich Dhui, and the desired-for top of Cairn Toul. Once or twice only did the last-named peak stand out brightly white before us. These rare moments of sunshine were delectable, and the grandeur of the vision filled us all with joy. We were now in the ice region; the snow we had left behind. The mountain at this part was rich with frost sculpture—flowers, leaves, feathers, and plumes.

Hundreds of clusters of ice-flowers were at our feet; they had the shape and size of primroses, and the petals were the shallow bell petal of that flower. There they lay in tufts and clumps, with their frost leaves around and behind them, beautiful in their exquisite whiteness and wonderful in their resemblance to the river-brim, or political flower. Then we saw frost feathers—in shape and size as if they had been dropped by some moulting covey of arctic birds; or noticed stones on the sides of which the frost sculptor had imitated the shape of the wings of some gigantic ermine bird. The pleasure of admiring the graceful outlines of many of these ice-wings made our progress slow, and we were almost oblivious of the storm. At other times the frost artist had copied the flat gray lichen that clings to rocks, and the imitation was perfect. There were also countless imitations of the shallow Japanese umbrellas sloping from the stones. One could not fail to admire the magic force of nature which, even from the bosoms of ice-crammed gales, was able to gently precipitate their molecules into feather and plume, leaf and flower; nor fail to wonder that the silent growth was pro-

ceeding where all seemed wild whirl and confusion. These frost forms grow out of the moisture in the gale, and take their shapes against it. The rounded flower shapes told of the whirlwinds that had gyrated on the hill top. Here we may mention that the staff in the cairn had a frozen flag facing the south, six or eight inches deep. It was fairly whole at the top, but the fury of the storm had broken off large parts.

As we neared the very summit our mist-cloud broke up overhead, and high above us—possibly 5000 feet—we had a vision of a serene summer day. Large mackerel-backed sheets of white clouds lay calm and restful, while smaller tufts of cloud quietly melted into an almost Italian blue. There was summer, with an infinite repose, above our fret and storm. Only for a short time was this revelation given—then the storm-cloud and the gray light once more enfolded all.

The crawl to the top over the boulders was toilsome and not without risk, owing to the difficulty of maintaining foothold when the wind rose. We reached the cairn at three o'clock, after a five hours' steady climb. There was no trace of shelter; the wind seemed to blow from all points. Flopping on the ice we took our lunch with more at the feast than we bargained for. It was a case of snow- and ice-peppered sandwich, and unless care were taken the wind snatched it away; the banquet had its own novel enjoyment. The temperature was 30°-32° F., and the wind made it feel most bitterly cold. Trying to eat with ungloved hands we found to be very painful and numbing—the ice and snow melting on the skin gave a sensation of intense chill.

We lingered for twenty minutes and then made for the south cairn, for no other reason than to "do" it; the spirit of thrawness was on us. Over and over again, we had wonderful proofs of the magnifying and distance-deluding power of the mist. When the south cairn was seen through a thinning in the cloud it looked half-a-mile away and high above us; we were at it in a minute or two, and its height was under that from which we viewed it. The descent had now to be tackled, and the storm once more faced. It is

impossible, without seeming to exaggerate, to give any idea of the virulence of the gale. For the next half-hour we were buffeted, tormented, blown over; stung by ice and hail, our faces were cut and bleeding; half choked with fine snow powder; our hands were numbed; and more than once we were fain to lie down rather than struggle against the gusts of wind that swept over the summit. In the gray light of the snow and mist we stumbled along from stone to stone, trusting to instinct and the aneroid, till we got to a somewhat lower level. Indeed, from the time we left the cairn till Loch Eunach was reached, it hardly ceased snowing. As we stepped along—a silent party in Indian file—over the hill side at an altitude of about 3650 feet, we were like incarnations of winter. Ice tangles hung from moustaches and beards, even eyebrows and eyelashes had their adornments; our clothes were caked in ice, and creaked and crackled as we walked along. The “trail” was not long in being blotted out—often the foot-prints of the leader were hardly visible to the rear man—as we plodded on, keeping slightly lower than on the upward journey. We had seen no animal life till now, when we came among ptarmigan. These beautiful birds were our companions for a while many of them tame enough to allow us to approach within a few yards. Then they emitted their curious grunt, upflew on white wings, and perched and waited further on.

Up and down; over snow ledge after snow ledge; here cracking the ice-fields under foot, there crunching the snow and sinking ankle deep; seeing great high snow hills in the mist which had to be crossed, and finding we were over them before we knew—we walked, pleased and silent, ever on the outlook. Suddenly the mist was blown aside, and we saw the mighty newly snow re-clad peaks of Sgòran Dubh. At that moment the sight was remarkable for its vivid wintriness. For at this altitude the lower parts of the hills were cut off from our vision, and, far as the eye could reach, came hill-top upcrowing on hill-top, tableland beyond tableland of spotless white, frozen lochs and snow-filled corries, and a gray sky looming down. Then there were the snow- and ice- clad figures moving slowly into the gloom

—the dog cowering at the heels of his master—surely an arctic day indeed.

We had, however, missed the top of our corrie—we had intended to use our old steps in the descent to the loch—so, the storm again threatening to become vicious, we descended to the head of the loch, keeping the Lochan nan Cnapan burn well to our left. And some of us regretted the old path, for the clamber down miniature precipices and over scree was not altogether a merry one, with now and again an enforced halt till particular blasts should pass and allow the depths below to be seen. But the five mountaineers—not unaccompanied by rock fragments—got safely down at last. The frost-hardened clothes thawed, and although quite dry on the hill-top, we were now soaked with moisture. Resting for a few minutes, we combed our clothes from their debris of ice and snow, and then proceeded, at seven o'clock, to the shieling by the path along the west side of the loch. There we encountered a change of weather, and, in the midst of sleet and rain, drove off to Boat of Garten. For two and a half hours we had the close and assiduous attention of a Highland shower which was resolved to show itself at its best. But there was comfort at "mine inn"—the warm bath, dry clothes (somewhat varied and picturesque), the wholesome dinner, the hot toddy, and the gorgeous repose of a ten-hours' dreamless sleep. The following day we were at work in the city, our necks in the yokes of duty.

A memorable day on the hills, full of wild grandeur and enduring memories. "This you call enjoyment", sneer some. Well, yes; to the healthy human being there is a wild delight in meeting and fighting the unchained forces of nature—a pleasure in seeing the wind sculpture on the snow fields, and the growth of ice flowers. There is a rapture to catch peak after peak clad in ermine, now with the glimmer of sunshine, anon with the mist drapery. And there is a wild intoxication in drinking the high mountain air that stimulates the senses and kindles the imagination to delights unknown to the contented level-loving dwellers on the plains.