

ROUND LOCH EUNACH.

BY JOHN GORDON, M.D.

WHILE some of the less thoughtful of the party had to employ the clachan cobbler at unseemly hours in tacket-driving, the leader of the expedition and the writer were stretched on the short heather and petty whin rehearsing the plan of the excursion. It had been proposed to ascend the western shoulder of Braeriach by the Coire Dhonndail bridle path, thereafter to cross between Loch Eunach and its feeder, Lochan nan Cnapan, to Sgòran Dubh. The evening was somewhat suggestive of a change in the weather, and as one of the company had read in the day's paper that a depression from the south-west was approaching, feelings of apprehension were possibly the more easily roused. The clouds hung low on the hills and lingered along the rim of the large plateau on which Boat of Garten is situated. But as we walked on a carpet of cranberry flowers to the little knoll which lies to the west of the village, somewhere from its lines of black firs the notes of the cuckoo greeted us, with something of hope in the wandering voice.

The following morning we were astir by five o'clock. The sun shone brightly as we started, the clouds were few, and the smell of the morning air was fresh and stimulating. While we drove along "the solitary morning smote the streaks of virgin snow" in the northern corries of Braeriach. We entered the grand forest of Rothiemurchus, bedecked in all the glory of the leafy month of June; and the purple vetches, the snow-white stars of the winter-green, and the blue of the speedwell were blended in profusion. Here a birch tree shook the sunshine and the dew from its glossy leaves, while the grim Scottish fir looked on. The juniper and the rowan stood side by side in flower. Passing along the narrow road which leads by the side of the Bennie the views were most lovely at almost every turn. Opposite Carn Elrick we were specially struck with the beauty of the scene. On the right hand the shoulder of the brae ran

up against an indigo blue sky, which was broken into lakes by the branches and stems of the firs and birches that edged the horizon. The Bennie ran, a seething silver stream, past rocks and pines, here enclasping an island with its trees and shrubs, there chattering over its pebbles. On the other side of the burn the sunshine lay in islands on the wonderful green of the newly opened blaeberry leaves. These isles of green sunshine shimmered in the wastes of the heather. No one can fail to be enchanted by the freshness of the young blaeberry leaves when the sunshine is lying on them. Higher up the hillside the sparse pines were sentineling their own shadows. Then the brown shoulder of the ridge, with gray and black lichened rocks, leaning with a rounded softness against the lighter blue of the sky. All this bathed in the fresh morning air, which had robbed birch, larch, fir, and juniper, and a thousand flowers of their perfumes, intoxicated the senses and quickened the delights of the morning in the forest. In front, seen through the trees, the glimpses got of the skirts of the hills looked purple in the faint mist that hung over Loch Eunach.

We were unable to drive to the upper bothy owing to a huge wreath of snow which lay across the road just beyond the Little Bennie. So there we left our conveyance, and made the necessary preparations for the climb. Although we were repulsed by this snow wreath—large enough to give work to a couple of men for a day or two to cut a carriage-way through—there was comparatively little snow to be seen on the hills.

And now to the right there towered up two thousand feet the black buttresses and grayish-red scree of Sgòran Dubh which even the sunshine failed to soften; in front Loch Eunach and its southern corries, the latter streaked with mountain rills which the rocks combed into white cataracts; and to the left the salmon-coloured gravelly shoulder of Braeriach with the stalkers' path zigzagging to the plateau.

As we sauntered upwards, passing a snow bridge, where the camera had its first outing, we could not help contrasting

this day of sunshine and softest streaming wind with the day of mist and tempest in which we toiled last year. To-day the jagged peaks of Sgòran Dubh were serene in the sunlight, except where some slowly moving cloud, herded by the gentle breeze, climbed up the corries, chimneys, and cracks, and, gaining their utmost limits, swept silently away. Only a few small patches of snow were left on the steep face, little tags of winter's ermine torn from her by the rocks and detained by the glooms. A year ago from out the mist and the snow-filled gullies only at times were the black ridges visible with an ominous grimness. Those vague, mysterious effects which mist produces on hills were gone, and we grudged them. To us our finest mountain days are set in mist. Not the mist that hangs like a funeral pall without change or movement, but where wind and mist combine to give that inexpressible delight to the mountain tops; where every minute the wind and the rocks like mighty shuttles weave it into cloud draperies of ever-changing varieties of shade and shape; when the eye wanders upwards and the vision lingers, or still stumbles on into a mysterious region where fancy takes up the chase and goes racing along till the next glimpse of sunshine plays, or the mist becomes diaphanous enough to disclose some landmark. Who that has ever spent such a day on the hills can forget the fantastic forms, the quaint suggestions, or the half-formed picture suddenly blotted out; and who has never felt a fierce delight as a torrent leaped unexpectedly across his route, or a deep gully suddenly gaped like a steaming cauldron below his feet, or gazed with wonder when some high peak struggling for light tossed the mist-cap from its head. On such a day the grunt of the startled ptarmigan is "eerie"—and the glimpse of red deer filing past, from shadow-land to shadow-land, becomes an enduring memory.

But "*chacun à son goût*", as a tolerant philosopher would say. And meanwhile, although we thought of the mist, we could not help looking backwards to feast the eyes on the distant Cromdale hills that now undulated softly on the far horizon in the thin morning haze—we saw

their patches of wood, and the green fields on their skirts. Below us the young river, proud of its escape from the loch, was leisurely enjoying its freedom before starting on its race to the Spey. Patches of black burnt heather blended with the early greens and last year's browns and grays. Loch Eunach lay purple in parts and inky black in others—the sun not yet having visited it; but the wind was there at a morning race, for we saw the little wavelets white-capped at times, or noticed a shiver run over the surface. The margins of the loch looked soft and lovely—the many yellow-sanded little bays shelving into the dark water and shining out of it in reddish brown, here a long, narrow margin of pebbles, there a miniature promontory shooting in to view its own image; while right in front the gray black Stuc, half in shadow by the wandering clouds, stood guardian of the scene.

When we entered Coire Dhonndail we found only a few hundred feet of snow; last year the whole was filled. The sun was busy at work, and as the melted snow fell glittering over the black rocks one was puzzled to make out if the sheen were not that of ice. There was no difficulty in crossing the snow, steep slope though it was, and the top of the corrie was speedily gained.

We now made for the March Cairn (4149) of Braeriach, some thousand feet above us, a surprisingly easy walk along a desert of gravel where plant life gets but the faintest hold. The only vegetation which we found, maintaining its own, was a species of velvet black moss—dotting the gravel in little cushions of fantastic shape, some looking like moles with feet embedded in the soil, as if they had begun to dig their homes. This variety struggled on—a solitary pioneer which none seemed able to follow. The vast, silent, forsaken region, extending for miles, gives one the feeling of intense desolation and loneliness. Nor beast, nor bird, nor flower was seen, while the only sound audible was the crunching of the loose sun-warmed gravel under foot. No trace of water—except dry “tear” tracks. Then when the memory goes back to the forest of Rothiemurchus, which has just been left in all its leafy glory, the contrast

of utter barrenness is still more impressive. Verily we were treading amongst "the riddlings of creation". The western ridge of the plateau gained, a descent was made on the Wells of Dee, but a great snow-field guarded them, and we had to be content with the young river as it appeared from below its eastern edge. Some of us, indeed, were surprised to find "the infant Dee" so vigorous and well developed at an altitude over 4000 feet. It flowed a fair-sized stream, four feet wide and five or six inches deep. Swiftly, too, it ran towards Fuar Gharbh-choire, rippling in the mountain breeze over its reddish gravel, and making a flowing network of the sunshine that fell on its surface. The southern edge of Fuar Gharbh-choire was next gained; the snow still well filled it. In the noon-tide rays the snow was of dazzling whiteness except where the wind-chased clouds swept their shadows over its depths. Within a stone-throw of where we sat the young Dee makes its first and greatest leap, a bound of some 200 feet from snow to snow, disappearing and re-appearing several times ere it brawls a white-crested racer in the bottom of An Gharbh-choire. In spite of their grimness the huge tempest-torn rocks that guard the top of the corrie had their southern sides softened by dustings of gray, green, and red lichens. While we gazed over out flew a ptarmigan, grunting as it went, on wings that were taking on their darker summer colour. This was the first living thing we had seen. Then presently a bee hummed past to the west—as if to give doubt to the poet's story that the "bugle of the summer bee" is there unheard.

All day long detached clouds had been sailing across the sky—or were teased overhead into thinnest films by the upper currents of the wind, but about this time their endless diversity was a source of changing pleasure. We watched them sail out of the north-west, voyage quietly over mountain, corrie, and tarn—away to the far horizon where they formed into a grotesque encircling rampart. Perched on the lip of the corrie we gazed along the Learg Ghruamach, half in shadow half in shine. To the right Sgòr an Lochain Uaine ran boldly out over the corrie; further on the two

cairns of Cairn Toul overlooked Glen Dee. On the left the corries of Ben Muich Dhui were filled with bright snow and wandering shadows. Lochan Uaine lay sullen in front, untouched by sunshine. Beyond the Pass the eye followed mountain upcrowding on mountain till on the extreme limit Lochnagar closed one view, while the grand outlines of the Beinn a' Ghlo group dominated the right horizon and compelled attention.

The mutterings of hungry men indicated that the luncheon hour had passed. A descent was necessary, and glissading over several large snow-fields we soon gained a lower level. Then a race across a rough and stony ridge and we were encamped by a little water-course on the east side of the Lochan nan Cnapan Burn. There in our skyey tent, curtained by the flowing wind, and on our carpet of heather and grass, we eat our high altitude meal. It may be interesting here to observe that the fluid portion of our luncheon consisted of a small quantity of beef juice mixed with spring water, and that this extemporised beef tea was the only fluid employed as a stimulant, and, further, that the evening never felt us less fatigued after a long day on the hills.

We had now reached the level where vegetation could live; we picked up specimens of adventurous violets (*Viola palustris*) as well as the Alpine variety of the marsh marigold, while the mountain lady's mantle gracefully outspread its lovely leaves, to contrast with the green mossy cushions of the moss campion (*Silene acaulis*) and their blush of faint pink flowers. More ptarmigan were startled and some of the party had sight of a noble herd of about 200 deer.

Our movements now led us over the ridge commanding the head of Loch Eunach, and as we proceeded we had ample opportunity to notice the water-worn sides of Braeriach and Sgòran Dubh—the one almost the replica of the other so far as their slopes were torn with water-courses, showing the loose grayish-red gravel which led in countless wastes to the margins of the loch. The route was a series of up and down climbs amongst “enaps” from which Lochan nan Cnapan derives its name. These “enaps” seem to

partake of the nature of moraines, and were in great diversity of shape and size, and hidden between them there were many jet black tarns. The south-eastern shoulder of Carn Ban (3443) was now traversed, where, under foot, grasses replaced "cnaps". By the side of a dilapidated shieling we lighted on an exquisite spring of water which after a somewhat arid climb was a treasure trove. Then began the last part of the day's work along the summit of Sgòran Dubh. And a delightful walk it proved; the evening air was so delightfully caller. Its carpet of wind-clipped moss had a springiness which to tired feet was most grateful. Over and over again we found ourselves compelled to compare the summit with the back of some gigantic animal which had recently been shorn by a somewhat wandering scissors, leaving big shear-marks all about. Sgòran Dubh Bheag (3658), as the highest top is called, is a great "Stuc" which prominently faces the climber as he approaches it from the south. When we stood on it looking down on the loch, 2008 feet below us, the shadow—or rather shadows—of the Stuc lay across the water in the form of two huge triangles—a central black one and an outer lighter in shade. The apex of the triangle while we lingered there in the softening light had just reached the foot of Braeriach, and we watched it gradually climbing up the hill as we unwillingly withdrew from the spot. Many and many a glimpse did we take down the rugged, buttressed side, the eastern face, of Sgòran Dubh, to Loch Eunach. We were struck with the evidences of the ice wedge in the vertically and horizontally fissured rocks so plentifully piled on the edge of the ridge. The western side of the mountain is, however, extremely disappointing when contrasted with the eastern. It is merely a great slope, covered with mosses and grasses, shelving gently down to the valley of the Feshie. One cannot help noticing, also, the great contrast that the top of Sgòran Dubh presents to that of Braeriach, although there is only a difference of about 600 feet in their altitudes. The former is a narrow table-land of moss, the latter a vast plateau of gravel.

Crossing a slight depression we reached Sgòran Dubh Mhor (3635), and from here the last horizon look was taken before the descent was commenced. The catalogue of mountains visible was given by Mr. Munro in the first number of the Journal. What specially filled us with admiration in the summer evening haze was the Spey lying like a long silver serpent fast asleep, while here and there among the cups of the hills lay little tarns, gleaming silver shields. Only dimly could the far-off western hills be seen, darker masses, as it were, in the gathering gloom. But even a June day draws to an end, and we had to make a drop of 2000 feet to the Bennie. We crossed it on boulders, observing that the day's heat had considerably increased its volume by the addition of melted snow. A walk of a short mile brought us, at eight o'clock, to the lower bothy and our wagonette. Without delay we were trotting down the glen through the glooms of the forest, now perfumed by its evening fragrance and noisy with the talk of the stream. As we neared Boat of Garten we saw a new range of mountain tops lording it over all, ridged with precipices and capped by cairns, here a plateau, there a valley—a vast phantasmagoria which the cloud artist had limned as if in serene mockery of our petty hills of rock and sand. While we looked, it changed and melted into nothingness. Through the peat reek of the clachan we smelled a lively meaning in "Oh, Hesperus! thou bringest all good things: home to the weary—to the hungry cheer".

From start to finish, the day had been full of sunshine and pleasure. If by no means rich in moving incidents it had a rich enjoyment all its own, and for one long day we had "summered high in bliss across the hills of God".