

THE LARIG GHRU.

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ON the walls of the Exhibition of the Royal Academy in London this year was hung a fine water-colour drawing of the Larig Ghru. It attracted much attention by its vivid representation of this remarkable cleft through the great mountain mass of the Cairngorm range. From the platform of the railway station at Aviemore the tourist may obtain a grand view of the massive and long-extended plateaus of Braeriach and Cairngorm, with this gloomy Pass opening between them, filled with writhing mists or dark shadows, or, when the sun shines directly into it, disclosing its rocky sides moistened by the melting of the snow-wreaths in the clefts above, lit up with a dazzling silver radiance. But the distance is too great to form there a true conception of its savage sublimity. You must actually enter for a considerable distance into the rugged jaws of the Pass itself before you realise its wild grandeur; and the painter of the Highland landscape alluded to must have taken his view-point from a spot very close to the foot of the mountains, which commanded not only the mouth of the Pass, but also the magnificent scenery in the narrow windings of the interior.

The Larig Ghru, or, to give it its full name, the Learg Ghruamach—or Savage Pass—separates between the eastern side of Braeriach and the western slopes of Ben Muich Dhui and Cairngorm. It pierces the great Cairngorm range from south to north, and is the principal route by which the pedestrian can cross from Speyside to Braemar. It used to be much frequented by drovers and shepherds, who transported their flocks and herds from the hillsides of Aviemore and Kingussie to the markets of Castletown on the Dee. But since the opening of the Highland Railway between Inverness and Perth these markets have been dis-

continued, and the surplus sheep and cattle of the district have been sent to the large towns and cities of the south. Consequently, the Pass has fallen into desuetude as a great public road, and is now used almost exclusively by adventurous tourists who wish to penetrate into the sublime solitudes of the Cairngorms. There never was any road worthy of the name in its palmiest days—only a species of bridle track; but, such as it was, it was kept in the best repair of which it was capable. But since its abandonment to the summer tourists, it has been allowed to revert to the wildness of Nature; and were it not for the zealous efforts of members of the Cairngorm Club, who have taken the matter in hand, it would by this time have become impassable. They have in many places smoothed the roughest parts of the track, and in others indicated its course, where it would otherwise have disappeared in bog or rocky desert, by the erection of stone-men as guides. Especially welcome are these rude cairns amid the vast bewildering heaps of *debris* that have fallen from the lofty cliffs on both sides of the Pass at its highest point, and meet together in the narrowest parts, and bar the way.

A gang of labourers employed for a few weeks would have removed all these difficulties of the route, and made it easy and pleasant for the tourist, either on foot or on horseback. But there are no public funds available for this purpose. Indeed, it is not considered desirable by the powers that be that the track should be maintained at all. It would be considered a piece of good fortune if it should disappear altogether, and these solitudes be entirely unvisited, so that the deer forests through which it passes might not be disturbed. For many years the Pass was closed to pedestrians, lest they should scare the game; and it was only after many unpleasant struggles that the Scottish Rights of Way Society succeeded in opening up a through communication between Aviemore and Braemar, and establishing the public right of way through this defile, which they had held from time immemorial, although for a time it had been foolishly suffered to pass into abeyance. But though the freedom of passage was ultimately conceded, it was restricted to the

narrowest line consistent with going through at all. No margin on either side of the track was permitted, and the pedestrian has in consequence to plant his feet in the exact footsteps of his predecessors, and so make the ruts ever deeper and more trying. In this way, the path is the most difficult and tiresome of any path in Great Britain. It is a pity that a more generous interpretation was not given to the licence allowed, so that the arduousness of the passage might have been somewhat mitigated. No one visiting this sublime solitude for the sake of the wild scenery would wish to inflict the slightest injury upon the sport of the huntsmen. Their interests would have been as sacred to him as his own; and the likelihood is that, treated with a generous trustfulness, he might be even more zealous of the rights of the proprietor than, as human nature is constituted, he can be at present.

The entrance of the Larig is about six miles from Aviemore. It is a delightful road all the way from the station, but it becomes especially romantic when you pass Polchar House, the residence of Dr. Martineau, and the Manse of Rothiemurchus, and pursue it beside a streamlet shaded with beautiful birch trees, hanging down their long, graceful tresses overhead. Mr. MacWhirter, who resided in the locality a few years ago, found among these birches charming studies for his facile pencil of the "Lady of the Woods". Entering by a gate, over which the Scottish Rights of Way Society has fixed a board indicating that this is the commencement of the public road to Braemar by the Larig, you skirt the northern shore of Loch an Eilein, embosomed among picturesque old fir forests, and overshadowed by the bare, round mountain mass of Cadha Mor, one of the outer spurs of the Cairngorm range. On the little island of this loch, which was originally a crannog or artificial lake-dwelling, there is a ruined castle, built by the Wolf of Badenoch, and covered with luxuriant ivy. The stumps of the huge fir trees from which the timber for the roofing and flooring of this castle was obtained, may still be seen on the margin of the bog, from which the people of the neighbourhood obtain their peats—preserved as hard

and undecayed as ever, after the lapse of all these centuries. On the top of one of the towers the osprey or sea-eagle, one of the rarest of our native birds, has built its nest. For several seasons the bird abandoned the locality, as it was not only persecuted by the crows, who stole the materials of its nest, but also frightened by the shouts of visitors, starting the curious echo reflected from the walls of the castle. But recently the pair came back; and I was fortunate enough last summer in seeing the male bird catching a large trout, and soaring up into the sky with it, held parallel to its body, with one claw fixed in the head and the other in the tail. After making several gyrations in the air, with loud screams, it touched its nest, only to soar aloft again, still pertinaciously holding the fish in its claws. A seagull pursued it, and, rising above, attempted to frighten it, so that it might drop the fish; but the osprey dodged the attacks of the gull, which finally gave up the game, and allowed the gallant little eagle to alight on its nest in peace, and feed its clamorous young ones with its scaly spoil. Loch an Eilein is one of the loveliest bits of scenery in this part of Scotland, and when the hills and open parts of the woods are crimson with the heather in full bloom, almost changing the water of the loch, by the magic reflection, into wine, contrasting with the rich blue-green of the fir trees, there is not a fairer sight to be seen in all the land.

Passing along the richly-wooded shore of this charming loch, you come at length to another index board of the Scottish Rights of Way Society, in the heart of the forest, where two ways meet. One of these ways leads through Glen Eunach to the wild loch of the same name, lying between Braeriach and Sgoran Dubh, in the very lap of the mountain solitude; and the other through the Larig to Braemar. Turning to the left, therefore, you speedily traverse a well-made road through the luxuriant heath and gigantic juniper bushes which form the underwood of the forest. On some of the young fir trees you notice the white, resinous exudations of a kind of gall—if one may call it so—the work of the larva of a moth called *Retinia resinana*. It is fairly widespread in Scotland, though nowhere

abundant; but in Norway it is exceedingly common in the pine woods. Sixteen square miles of the old, aboriginal forest of Rothiemurchus were many years ago cut down, and their place occupied by young plantations, which have nevertheless attained to a respectable size. Here and there, in the depths of the forest, you come upon the relics of the mighty past: trees of enormous height and girth, whose red trunks, armoured with thick scales, like a cuirass, from head to foot, and knotted and tortuous branches, clothed with masses of blue-green needles, maintain a sturdy defiance to the shock of the tempest, and the quiet, insidious ravages of decay. The huge boles of the living trees, like Nature's own tallies, record in the mystic rings in their inmost heart the varying moods of the passing seasons; while the roots left behind in the ground, where their neighbours have fallen, still preserve their red, resinous freshness, and, when cut into splinters, burn on the hearth with a delightfully bright, perfumed flame.

The dense masses of vegetation in this forest strike one with astonishment. Not an inch of soil but is covered with a tangled growth of heather, blaeberry and cranberry bushes, and juniper; and, feeding parasitically upon the underground stems, are immense quantities of yellow *Melampyrum*, or cow-wheat, and pale, ghostly spikes of *Goodyera*—a kind of orchis. The mosses are in great variety, and in extraordinary luxuriance; the rare and lovely ostrich-plume feather moss growing in the utmost profusion on the shady knolls. There are innumerable ant-hills of various sizes, some being enormous, and must have taken many years to accumulate. You see them at various stages. Some are fresh and full of life, crowded with swarms of their industrious inhabitants. But many are old and deserted, either half grown over with the glossy sprigs of the cranberry, or completely obliterated by the luxuriant vegetation. All through the forest you see little mounds covered with blaeberry and cranberry bushes, which clearly indicate their origin. They were originally ant-hills. Each particle of them was collected by the labours of these insects. If you dig into them, you will find the foundation

to be composed exclusively of pine needles, and you can trace the tunnels and galleries made by the ants. It is a curious association this of plant and animal life—a kind of symbiosis! The struggle between the two kinds of life is seen here in a most interesting way. The wave of the undergrowth of the forest, in its slow, stealthy, irresistible progress, encroaches upon the ant-hills, and forms at first a ring around their base. Gradually it creeps up their sides, and you see one-half of the ant-hill covered with cranberry bushes and the other half retaining its own characteristic appearance of a heap of brown fir needles, with the ants swarming over them, busy at their work. But the vegetable wave still advances, and finally extinguishes the last spark of animal life on the mounds, and rolls its green crest over their buried contents. In this remarkable way, the soil of the forest is formed by a combination of the labours of plant and animal life. The remains of both form its constituent elements; and it is a curious reflection that in after ages, when the forest decays, and its site is converted into a peat bog, part of the substance of the peat, from which the future human inhabitants of the locality will dig their fuel, will have been formed by the labours of the ant!

The direct opening of the Larig Ghru is at the point where a stone-pillar and a guide-post stand, on the upper side of the main road through the forest, about three miles above Loch an Eilein. Were it not for these patent indications, the obscure entrance would often be missed by the stranger. For nearly a mile the path passes through a scraggy fir forest, its narrow course almost concealed by the luxuriant heather meeting over it from both sides. The quality of the ground varies continually, from soft peat bog to hard granite gravel and rough boulders, and one has to walk by faith and not by sight, getting many rude shocks and sudden trippings from unseen and unexpected obstacles. In wet weather this part of the route is altogether deplorable, and is the occasion of so many disasters that one becomes utterly reckless, plunging on, heedless of the sodden state of one's shoes and the dragged wretched-

ness of one's clothes. The track mounts continually upwards, until at last you rise above the straggling forest into the wide, open moorland, with a grand view all around, and the free air of heaven playing with grateful coolness on your heated face. Here you pursue your way over huge moraines, the relics of the ancient glaciers that once swept over this region, and converted it into an undulating strath of the most surprising labyrinthine heights and hollows. The path takes you along the edge of these great mounds, where their broken sides slope down precipitously to the channel of the burn that foams and roars over its boulders far below. It is a magnificent spectacle, and the sound of many waters, that comes up to you, and seems to fill all the hushed, listening air like the shout of a multitude, is very inspiring. The sides of the moraines are covered with masses of blaeberry and cranberry bushes, loaded with their purple and scarlet berries; for, whatever may be the failure of the wild-fruit harvest in the low grounds, where sudden frosts and blights in spring and early summer are so apt to wreck the richest promise, an abundant crop may always be gathered here, above the risk of such casualties.

You get fairly into the mouth of the Pass when you see directly opposite to you, on your right hand, the bare, conical hill of Carn Elrick, which rises to an imposing altitude at this point. It is the "sanctuary" of Rothiemurchus Forest, where the deer escaping into it are not allowed to be shot. It looks like a grand, solemn Sphinx, set to guard the portals of a mountain region of mystery and romance. The path winds along the desolate foot of Castle Hill, a rugged spur of the Cairngorm range, to the left. Here and there the last solitary firs of the forest contend with the elements, and are twisted and dwarfed, and sometimes bleached into skeletons, by the severity of the struggle. But you hardly notice them, for they are extinguished by the universal magnitude of the inorganic masses and forces around. From this point the Pass opens up a wide, treeless waste of utter solitude; the dim and indistinct track here and there marked by a cairn. Terraces of moraine

matter, broken and gleaming white in the sunshine, indicating the different levels at which the stream formerly ran, bank up its course; and little rills, coursing down the mountains from both sides, fall into it to swell its volume. This region has never been animated by human life. It is above the zone of cultivation. No ruin of hamlets, with nettles growing round the cold hearthstones, cluster on the spots where the turf is softest and greenest among the heather, to testify of forcible evictions and heart-broken farewells, and of the new homes of exiles far away across a world of seas. The peace here is not the peace of death, to which man's works return, but the peace of the primitive, untamed wilderness. From time immemorial the region has been dedicated to the noble pastime dear to the old kings and chieftains of Scotland. Large herds of red deer frequent the corries; but you may wander for days over the boundless waste without seeing a single antler, when all at once you may behold on the ridge over your head a score or two standing motionless gazing at you, with their horns piercing the sky-line like skeleton boughs. It is a grand sight, but it is only momentary, for, scenting danger, they disappear over the shoulder of the mountain, noiselessly like a dream, into the safe shadows of another glen.

At the large boulder, surmounted by a stone-man, which crowns the highest point of the Pass you have yet reached, and which commands a splendid vista, looking back, of the richly wooded scenery of the Spey around Aviemore, the defile contracts, and you have on the one side the great precipices of Braeriach, and on the other the rugged, frowning buttresses of Creag na Leacainn, which look as if they threatened to fall down and crush you. These rocky jaws of the Pass are composed of red granite, which looks in the heaps of broken *débris* at the bottom of the defile what it really is, but up in the overhanging cliffs has taken on a dark purple bloom by weathering, which completely disguises its true character, and in stormy weather assumes a most gloomy and forbidding appearance, greatly enhancing the savage aspect of the gorge. Granite, wherever it occurs, is always characterised by a special type of

scenery. It usually exhibits a tame uniformity of outline, unrelieved even by the great height to which it is often elevated. Owing to the ease with which this rock may be decomposed by the weather, and the protection which the angular rubbish thus formed gives to the surface, being constantly renewed as often as it is wasted away by the elements, it forms long, uniform, gently-inclined slopes. But, owing also to its being traversed by innumerable vertical joints, this rock forms savage corries and dizzy cliffs, which the decays of Nature only make more precipitous, as they remove slice after slice from their faces. Thus the different angular exposures of the rock to the wasting powers of Nature at the front and at the back of Braeriach, for instance, have given rise to the widely different appearances of the hill from those two points of view, which so astonish the visitor. The smooth, undulating slopes and table-land on the west side of the hill, contrast in a remarkable manner with the vertical walls into which the mountain breaks down all at once on the east and north sides, descending sheer for two thousand feet into the profound, mist-hidden glens. There is no other rock which combines these apparently incongruous features on the same range—the grandeur of lofty precipice and the smoothness of sloping shoulder and level top.

About a mile farther up the Pass you have to cross over the stream, at a point where an enormous avalanche of angular masses of rock has poured down the left side of the hill into the valley. Through this cataract of stones you hear the loud rumble of an unseen cataract of water falling from the heights, and forming one of the tributaries of the stream at your feet. The spot makes a kind of *cul de sac* or a recess on the route, where you can get shelter from the wind, soft materials for a couch to lie upon, fuel to kindle a fire, and plenty of the coldest and most delicious water, all inviting you to rest awhile and make ready an *al fresco* meal. Around you are bushes of the rare bog whortleberry (*Vaccinium uliginosum*), mingling with the common blaeberry, but easily distinguishable from it by its more straggling habit, and by the glaucous

or gray-green colour of its leaves. Its berries are very like the blaeberry, only of a somewhat flatter shape, and with a more refined taste. In this favoured corner of the Pass you may gather in abundance on the slopes in the neighbourhood the rare and interesting cornel, the *Cornus suecica* beautiful alike in its flowering and fruiting stage. It has a large, brilliant, white, strawberry-like blossom, but in the centre is a dark purple tuft, almost black, which gives it a very singular appearance. The apparent white petals are actually bracts, which remain on the plant when the flowers are fertilised, and gradually go back to the green colour of the ordinary leaves, as is the case in the Christmas rose. The dark purple tuft in the centre consists in reality of the true flowers. In autumn the foliage of the cornel fades into beautiful red and orange tints, and the blossoms give place to one or more large transparent scarlet berries. In its fruiting stage it is a very striking and conspicuous plant, and cannot fail to attract the eye even of the greatest novice in botany. I remember finding in this spot several dwarf specimens of the very rare *Saxifraga rivularis* in flower growing on the mossy stones forming the steps by which you cross the stream to the other side, nourished by the constant spray of the descending waters; and I daresay a diligent search in the vicinity would be rewarded by finding this flower in abundance. On the shady, broken parts of the bank I observed a magnificent sheet of the somewhat uncommon lichen, the *Baeomyces icmadophila*, with its gray-green crust covered with hundreds of pale pink, fleshy apothecia, exhaling a peculiar, pungent odour. It was the finest and largest specimen I ever saw.

The stream above this spot for a considerable distance disappears below the ground, and the channel where it should flow is covered with blaeberry and whortleberry bushes. Higher up you see it again pursuing its rejoicing course in the light of day, and in unabated fulness, over stones covered with the softest and richest mosses of the most vivid green and golden colours. These mosses in the bed of the stream give to the music of the waters a peculiarly subdued and muffled tone, like a prolonged sigh,

which greatly increases the feeling of melancholy in the forlorn waste around. The path here passes over ground peculiarly bare and hard and storm-scalped. Hardly any vegetation grows on it, save the hoary, woolly-fringe-moss *Trichostomum*, the white reindeer lichen, the brown alpine cudweed, and grotesque tufts of club-moss. The stones are blackened with various species of *Gyrophora*, or Tripe de Roche, looking like fragments of charred parchment, which crunch under your tread into black powder. Nothing can exceed the loveliness of the lemon crust of the *Lecidea geographica*, the geographical-lichen, which spreads over the granite boulders everywhere in great, well-shaped patches, looking like maps with its glossy black apothecia and little, waving cracks. Its vivid yellow colour contrasts in the most charming manner with the vivid red of the surface of the granite stone on which it grows. This is the most arctic, antarctic, and alpine lichen in the world, and marks the extreme limit of vegetation everywhere; and, like most alpine lichens, it becomes brighter and lovelier the higher up you go. It is a perfect feast of beauty to the eye that can appreciate it, all along the track in this region. In the beds of the clear, cold rills that cross your path you see the most wonderful crimson, golden, emerald, and even black mosses, some of them rare, and one particularly very rare, growing profusely, the *Hypnum trifarium*, which I had never seen elsewhere than high up in alpine bogs on Ben Lawers. These variegated mosses and hepaticæ shelter the roots of starry saxifrages, yellow and white, and keep the coolness and crystal clearness of the waters for the thirsty lips of the perspiring traveller.

Beyond this point you enter on a region of extreme desolation. The stream that has been your companion all along has disappeared. You are now on the watershed of the Pass, about 2750 feet above the level of the sea. On your left hand the south-west side of Ben Muich Dhui rises up to the lofty sky-line in almost perpendicular slopes of granite detritus, on which hardly a speck of grass, or lichen, or moss is seen. They stand out against the clear blue cloudless sky, when the sun on a

bright day is shining full upon them, with the most intense scarlet radiance, like a mound of newly-burnt slag at the mouth of a mine. The course of a side stream, descending from the heights in a series of white cascades, breaks the uniformity of these great slopes, and is supposed to form the true source of the Dee. There is another stream which disputes the honour with it, viz., the Garrachory Burn, which rises in two or three small springs called "The Wells of Dee", near the top of the east shoulder of Braeriach. The one stream is about as large as the other, and contains an equal volume of water; so that there is no reason why the source of the Dee should not be attributed to the highest mountain in the district instead of to the second highest. The right-hand side of the Pass is formed of the rugged precipices of Braeriach, that look fearfully black and stern, in striking contrast with the bright red slopes of Ben Muich Dhui on the other side. These are indeed

"The grisly cliffs that guard
The infant rills of Highland Dee".

Immense heaps of rough and crowded blocks of stone that have fallen from these cliffs obstruct the way, and being often sharp, and set on edge in all varieties of awkward positions, the footing is exceedingly precarious, and the progress over them must be slow and cautious. The stonemen of the Cairngorm Club are an immense help in the perplexing intricacies of the track. Here and there cases of alpine verdure occur among the leafless cairns, where the weary eye is refreshed by seeing frequent gray-green rosettes of alpine cudweed (*Gnaphalium supinum*) upholstering mossy ground, tufts of glossy dark green alpine rue, and in one or two places clusters of the rare and striking *Saussurea alpina*, with its pale blue composite flowers, and large, handsome leaves, reminding one of the name of the great Swiss naturalist who first ascended Mont Blanc. In hollow basins among these heaps of detritus are the three principal Pools of Dee. They are evidently formed by the perpendicular stream that falls from the shoulder of Ben

Muich Dhui, and is lost for a time under the cairns, to reappear at intervals in these sheets of water, where the ground is unobstructed. They are circular in shape, and of considerable size, with a margin of mossy verdure at the foot of the rampart of boulders hemming them in. The water is of a greenish-gray colour, like snow water, and is extremely cold even on the hottest day. It is so transparent that, though of great depth, the Pools look quite shallow.

Clambering over the last barrier of wreckage from the cliffs, you come down on the other side to the source of the Dee. There you see the river rushing full-bodied and complete at once from under the huge mass of moss-covered stones, proclaiming its freedom in a loud, confused roaring. You obtain a long vista of the other side of the Pass, with the narrow, rugged path gleaming white at intervals, as it winds down to the cultivated glens and straths beside the swift river. Amid an array of giant mountains unequalled in Scotland within a similar area, forming the guardians of the Pass on either side, your eye catches the magnificent, steep sides and conical top of Cairn Toul, which fills up the whole southern side of the gorge. You sit down beside the clear waters, that give such a sense of overflowing, unfailing fulness, and yield yourself freely to the thoughts and feelings that arise in your heart. You feel that there is a spell upon you which it would be sinful to disturb. The imagination of a *Doré* could suggest nothing more wildly desolate than this secluded fountain-head of waters, with the mountain-streams murmuring around it, and the vast, solitary peaks rising above it, shutting it out from all except the sun for a few hours at mid-day and the stars at night. Nothing can exceed the loneliness of the place. One coming here alone would almost thank his shadow for the suggestion of companionship which it afforded. But what a field for meditation to one who is in league with the stones of the field, and who can interpret the mysterious signs in which the dumb mountains speak to him! The stream has the voice of a sibyl uttering mystic oracles; and an occasional alpine bird, flitting about, made almost tame by its ignorance of man, soothes the listening

air with its tender twitter, and makes the place where it is seen and heard the very soul of the loneliness. How full of significance does every stone become; and how touching is the mute appeal of each alpine flower by your side! You feel yourself a small and unheeded atom in the midst of the overwhelming masses of matter around you; and yet you feel, at the same time, that you belong necessarily to the heart of things, and supply the element of consciousness to them all, and are folded closely round in the arms of Infinite Love. In all your life you have never been so alone with Nature, in the very heart of it, as here. You seem to hear the very pulse of the earth, to feel something of the eternal leisure of the mountains. Nature lays her cool, calm hand upon the tumult of your heart, and, while she humbles you and makes you poor in your own esteem, she exalts you and enriches you with her wealth of grand suggestions.

It is indeed an interesting experience to stand beside the source of any river, from the majestic Nile and the storied Tiber, down to the humble Dee. There is a mystery about its origin in that spot which captivates the mind, and recalls all the romance and tenderness of "youth and buried time". You follow in imagination from this point the noble river, which has no superior in Scotland for the clearness of its waters and the uniform swiftness of its current, along its whole course downward, till it reaches the inhabited valleys, and brings the blessings of the lonely hills to the homes and haunts of man. And you think that, as the waters flow now, while your image is reflected upon them, so they will continue to flow, through sunlight and starlight, when you are far away; and new generations, with new thoughts and feelings, will come to visit their romantic cradle when your own memory has sunk into oblivion. I have painted the scene in a calm summer's day; but what must it be in winter, or in a storm, when the shallow waters are changed into raging torrents, and the wind is shrieking fiercely among the rocks, and the sky is blotted out with dark clouds, and the corries are filled with swirling mists, and drizzling rains, and blinding snow! Such a Walpurgis scene it is not for man to behold!