

THE CAIRNGORMS.

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It is assuredly true in many senses that there is nothing new under the sun that shines upon the Cairngorms. The hills stand there precisely as they did when my father made a sketch map of them in 1840. The colour zones on Loch Avon grow bright and dark just as they did when

CARN A' MHAIM.

DEVIL'S POINT.



IN GLEN DEE.

Photo. by

Mr. J. J. R. Macleod, M.B., Ch.B.

the neighbourhood was haunted by that most boisterous of poets, John Wilson. Gharbh-choire burn raves white from sky to glen just as it did when John Hill Burton slumbered sedately on its bank. But then, as all sound metaphysicians inform us, the Object is only a small part of the act of Perception. It may, therefore, be impossible for us to realise the world of solitude and romance that existed in

the pre-tourist and pre-mountaineering days. We can faintly imagine (because it has been described by a master hand) the feelings of adventure and excitement with which Frank Osbaldistone and Mr. Nicol Jarvie approached the Highland hills: "While I gazed on this Alpine region, I felt a longing to explore its recesses, though accompanied with toil and danger, similar to that which a sailor feels when he wishes for the risks and animation of a battle, or a gale, in exchange for the insupportable monotony of a protracted calm". Such emotions can hardly now be experienced upon the Aberfoyle branch of the Stirlingshire railway. It is even difficult fully to sympathise with the pathetic narrative of "the poor student of King's College, Aberdeen", William Macgillivray, who, as he tells us in his delightful "Natural History of Deeside and Braemar", in September, 1819, slept in the great corrie of Braeriach on his way to Kingussie and Fort-William: "about midnight I looked up and saw the moon with some stars. They were at times obscured by masses of vapour which rolled along the summits of the mountains. I was near the upper end of a high valley, completely surrounded by enormous masses of rock. Behind me, my face being towards the mouth of the valley, there rose at its upper end a high mountain involved in clouds; on the right hand was another in the form of a pyramidal rock, and contiguous with it a peak of less elevation; on the left hand, a high ridge running from the mountain in the north-west, and terminating at the mouth of the valley in a dark conical mass; and straight before me, in the south-east, at the distance of nearly a mile, another vast mountain". We cannot now envelope Cairn Toul, and the Angel's Peak and the Sron na Leirg in the same delightful mystery; but I have always thought with respect and admiration of that poor student who marched into the centre of this difficult and unknown country, not even knowing that the Learg Ghruamach lay before him; bivouacked on his "scanty store of barley bread"; and at sunrise, after his sleep upon the heather, ascended the rocks of the Gharbh-choire and drank from the true sources of the Dee. If, however, we cannot enter fully into the life

of the past, we may be permitted to record some of our own impressions, although these contain absolutely nothing novel from the point of view of science or even of sport.

My first experience of the Cairngorms was of the nature of a defeat. We had left the Castletown in good time on a Saturday morning in late September. The day was doubtful, but inviting: we knew nothing of the country. Our pace must have been slow, because after a lazy lunch near Derry Lodge, we were not half-way up the Luibeg, intending to ascend by the Allt Carn a' Mhaim, when the



DERRY LODGE.

*Photo. by**Mr. John M'Gregor.*

winds came, and the floods descended, and beat upon the two wretched human insects, struggling along each with a 15 lb. knapsack. With the obstinacy natural to Scotsmen, I believe we should have struggled on, had we not met something even more influential than the wind. This was Ranald Macdonald, assistant keeper, then living in the Luibeg Cottage. He had been watching our contortions through a glass; he had orders to stop us; his humanity, too, was excited, for the ghost of the Feith Buidhe only knows what would have become of us, had we proceeded to

the ridge. It was a terrible night, and, personally conducted by Ranald, we retreated, but not ingloriously, to Luibeg Cottage, there to be dried and fed and put to bed in a box. Like Kitchener, and other brave conquerors, Ranald was kindness itself; and next morning his sister gave us a breakfast consisting of milk-porridge served with cream, the memory of which still remains with us as a fragrant oasis in the arid wastes of human life. We then made the ascent by Corrie Etchachan in fair light, but increasing cold. The corner peep down into Luibeg was practically the last

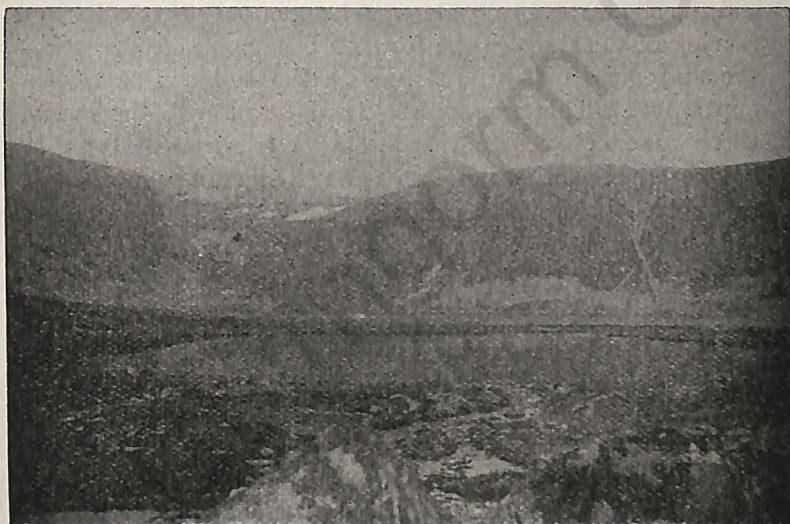


Photo. by

LOCH ETCHACHAN.

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light we had, for before the pony-shelter was reached, a dense freezing mist caught the whole ridge, and I decline to say how many hours we spent, "in hopeless mazes lost", wandering from the rocks of Loch Avon to the Glenmore Corries. It is all very well to laugh—and now I could probably find my way about blindfold—but if an utter stranger wishes an unpleasant sensation, let me recommend him, after a whole evening's straying, to try the Fiacail Coire an t-Sneachda in impenetrable mist with the thermo-

meter about 20°. Nothing could be easier than this way down, but as we saw nothing but yawning abysses of black, we prudently retreated up the rock and along the ridge, and then about 6:30 p.m. the clouds lifted for one glorious instant, and we saw Loch Morlich and its woods lying in strong colour, and a plain road there by the burn of Creag na Leacainn and the cottage of old Grace Gordon at Rie-aonachan at the corner of the black pines. Before we reached the yellow sand beach of the Loch, the night had totally changed. It was a clear and splendid star-light, overhead the Cairngorm was glittering in new fallen snow, and the silence and solitude were broken only by the hoarse roaring of the stags in the forest. I have never forgotten the strangeness of this scene or the suddenness of its appearance. This was before Lord Stamford's days, and there was no chance of a bedroom in Glenmore. It must have been 11 p.m., when two exhausted tramps presented themselves before Mrs. Cumming's Inn at Lynwilg, and at least half an hour elapsed before it was possible to overcome the sound sleep and Sabbatarian principles of the establishment.

My next attack was also from the Braemar side, and consisted of a leisurely walk, in fine weather, up to the Pools of Dee, from which we crossed by the Feith Buidhe to the Shelter Stone. The rain began to fall as we descended the rocks, but with our good plaids and plenty of heather, we spent a comfortable night in this cave, once the resort of poachers and occasionally used by outlaws; and we achieved a great triumph by producing a hot soup for breakfast the following morning. There are few things in this world more suggestive of absolute purity than the sunrise on Loch Avon. The intense radiance that comes up the narrow glen from the east, the limpid clearness of the water of the lake, the lovely glow of the golden granitic gravel, are things that cannot be forgotten. No wonder dear old Sir Thomas Dick Lauder chose this as the scene of one of the leading events in that immortal romance, "The Wolf of Badenoch". It is true the good baronet lays on his colours rather thickly. The Feith Buidhe becomes

“an extensive plain covered by a hardened glacier”. A precipitous zig-zag leads down the cliffs between two foaming cataracts. As you drop with precarious footing from one pointed rock to another, the crags hang over your head as if threatening to part from their native mountains; and it is only by a desperate leap over one of the cataracts that you escape total destruction. All that makes a nice,

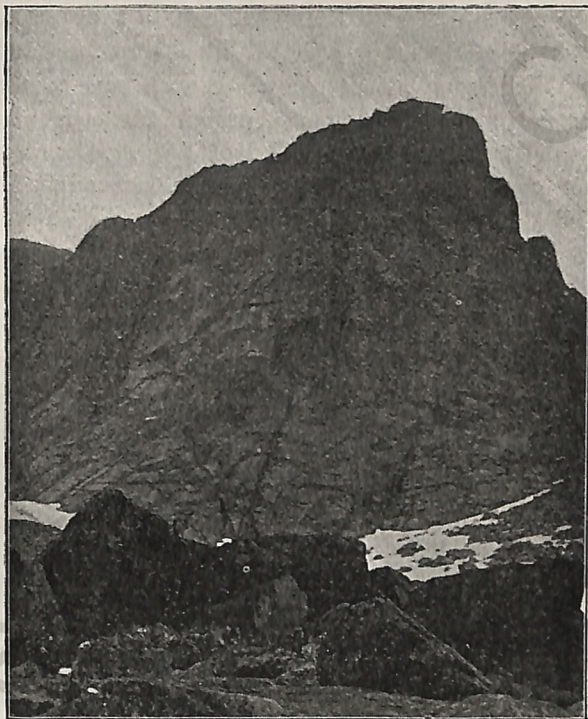


Photo. by

THE SHELTER STONE CRAG.

Mr. A. F. Dugan.

romantic setting for Sir Patrick Hepborne and the fair page, Maurice de Grey, but it is unnecessary to say that, except when there is ice-glazing, the walk down by the big slabs over the Garbh Uisge is the simplest thing in the world. When there was a good deal of snow on the upper part of the cliff, I have seen a man go over and rattle down on the rocks below, without any serious consequences.

What the pale shade of Sir Thomas is justly entitled to complain of is the ever-increasing accumulation of tin pots, not now containing preserved meat, just in front of the Shelter Stone, which seems to call for proceedings under Section 381 of the Burgh Police Act, 1892. Perhaps, however, the Stone is not yet a populous place within the meaning of that statute! It would be but a modest sacrifice to the spirit of solitude, if visitors to Loch Avon could be induced to put their rubbish out of sight. The fallen rocks and the big, fruitful blaeberry bushes are too beautiful for such desecration. There are many ways northwards from Loch Avon, the most interesting being up into Coire Domhain or into Coire Raibert, which lead to the crest of the Cairngorm, and there command the best views of the Spey country. The contrast is remarkable between the soft, yellow grass of Raibert and the rocks beyond the crest. The worst is, undoubtedly, that across the Saddle into the Garbh Allt, which combines in an unprecedented manner all the horrors of stone and bog. On the occasion I speak of, we followed the example of Sir Thomas Dick Lauder, and descended the south side of the lake to the ford on the road from the Dubh Lochans, and then struck north by the breezy Learg an Laoigh, round the back of Bynac. This was a perfect day, and not knowing even the road down to Abernethy, we struck over the side of the Tulloch of Garten, so as to make a bee-line for the old inn at Boat of Garten. I should not mention this route, had it not brought us on the moor to a well of great depth and of exquisitely cold water. A rough board had been erected by its side, bearing this inscription: "O fuanan, O goil: *splendidior vitreo, dulci digne mero, non sine floribus*". I have never seen this well since, and I should much like to know by whose pious hand these lines were inscribed. Flowers there were in plenty; we translated *merum* into Lochnagar, and thought the mixture perfect. Horace, at the Bandusian fountain, could not have felt happier. I have now a tolerably intimate knowledge of the Cairngorm system and the forests that surround it, and especially of Braeriach and Cairn Toul, but I always look back to these first skirmishes as the best of all.