

## THE LARIG GHRU IN APRIL.

BY EDWARD MASON, MUS. BAC.

It was a merry, albeit a rather fatigued and footsore, party that lunched at noon on 19th April last by the side of Loch Phitiulais. There were five of us: the writer and wife; brother George, a youth of sixteen; R——, whose modesty and good temper are only equalled by his keen appreciation of the beauties of nature and the length of his stride; and the writer's devoted dog "Rover", the companion of many a mountaineering excursion. As we lingered by the loch-side the mist, which had enshrouded the hills all morning, lifted, and revealed to our eyes the first glimpse of the snow-clad heights we were destined to cross on the morrow. It was, of course, too late to start for Braemar that day, so we trudged leisurely on to Coylum Bridge, where we hoped to find accommodation for the night as well as information about the state of the Larig Ghru. We obtained neither; so we continued our walk to Lynwilg Hotel, through Inverdrue, where we saw, not without envy, a band of gipsies encamped for the night. Our genial landlord informed us that the Pass *might* be managed, and did not attempt to dissuade us from the enterprise; would that he had!

We left Lynwilg the following morning, at 8.30, under somewhat Arctic conditions—a blizzard in miniature, with occasional gleams of sunshine. Back we went to Coylum Bridge, and there entered the Glen Eunach road—the more direct route by the Spey ford not being negotiable. Auldruie passed, the path was easily traced, as it presented the appearance of a rivulet! To avoid this was tiring work, as the alternative was wet, knee-deep heather, with a soft carpet of saturated sphagnum below. Still we got along; the magnificent white pall in front drew perceptibly nearer, while the brown valley behind slowly receded. We had a snap-shot at the Alpine scene, the last for the day, for soon the route began to assume a rougher aspect, and stumbling

became general. A result was that much violence was done to the camera, and it declined to take further notice of the outer world—to the loss of our readers and others!

We reached the snow-line by noon, toiling through indescribable slush. Snow was still falling, but, happening on a huge boulder, we got to leeward for shelter, and lunched. Truly that was a "cold" collation! Thereafter came our severest trials: we found our way blocked by a mighty pile of granitic detritus stretching from high up the hill-sides down to the bottom of the Pass. For an hour and a half we endeavoured to conquer this barrier. Patches of soft snow lay over and between the boulders, so there were many involuntary plunges—sometimes to the knees only, oftener to the thighs, and occasionally even to the shoulders. Frequently stopping to help each other out of tight places, we attained the top of the barrier, only to find that it was absolutely impossible to descend the other side. Painfully retracing our steps, we tried other routes, but with the same result. We now cursed the folly of our undertaking—especially with a lady in the company. Why had we allowed her to come? Her plight was truly deplorable; frequently she had to be lifted bodily out of the hidden pit-falls between the boulders. Yet, though wet, benumbed, and bruised, she was not dispirited. At this critical juncture George suggested that, as we could not get *over* the difficulty, we might get *round* it by climbing up the mountain-side. With a sigh of relief, we thus put the miserable bouldery pile behind us. The descent proved a very awkward operation, falls being more numerous than ever, till at last we took to sliding as best we could. So disgusted were we with our experience of boulders that we went down to the burn to see if we could wade up its course (we were already quite wet), as did the soldiers, under similar conditions, in the late Tirah campaign. But finding that the bed of the stream was as rough as the mountain-side, we abandoned the attempt. Ascending again, we crossed wide stretches of snow of great depth, relieved occasionally by the dark face of a huge projecting rock. It was past two o'clock, yet we were more than two miles from the summit

of the Pass. The sun now broke out through the clouds, beating down so fiercely upon us that we were soon sunburnt. The heat loosened white patches on the hill-sides, and then set free great stones, which came thundering down to the bottom of the Pass. Disturbed by the noise, the ptarmigan, the solitary inhabitants of the region, took flight, crying hoarsely as they sped along. These were the only sounds that broke the intense and awe-inspiring stillness.

Our progress was very slow. At every step we sank to the knees, sometimes even deeper; so it was five o'clock ere we reached the col. We had taken five hours to the last three miles! Here we finished our sandwiches, cheering one another with the reflection that we had no more climbing. Our thirst was intolerable; we had not had a drink since we had left the stream three hours ago, nor could we hope for one till we should reach the Pools of Dee. Resuming our journey, we found the slope pretty steep, but the going good, as the deep drifts of snow were here frozen hard for about an inch from the surface. As for the Pools, we saw nothing of them, but guessed their position from hollows showing here and there traces of ice, to which, of course, we gave a wide berth. As soon as we saw water we began to covet it, so R—— volunteered to fetch a supply. Creeping cautiously towards the stream, he approached close to its margin, when the overhanging snow gave way, and he went with it! Thereafter came hateful slush and miserable bog. Countless streams poured down from the mountains, and had to be leapt or waded. Soft snow also overhung some of them, into which we often disappeared as we attempted to cross. The condition of the lady, brave as she was, can only be imagined. George was, as usual, in front, endeavouring to catch sight of the path. His joy was great when he discovered it, and, river-bed though it was, he stuck to it grimly and patiently. At eight o'clock we were abreast of the Devil's Point, where the slight ascent in the path nearly placed us all *hors de combat*. We were becoming utterly exhausted, and but for a little brandy and water, with some morsels of food, we

should have been unable to proceed further. It was now getting dark, and the frost was keen. "Rover" was a mass of icicles; our clothing was frozen stiff. Cold and exhausted, we toiled on, while our vivid imaginations, quickened by anxiety, presented to our gaze numerous houses in the valley below. As we drew nearer, these buildings melted into misty shadows beneath the feeble light of the moon. A direction post—welcome omen to travelling humanity—changed into a tree! With considerable difficulty we forded the Lui Beg, as we failed to see the foot-bridge. We proceeded in a most helpless and hopeless condition; despair began to seize us. Moving aimlessly forward, we came to the river once more—here so wide and deep that fording was beyond all question. But the darkest hour had come; the dawn was at hand, heralded to us by the distant barking of a dog. By-and-bye we saw a light, from which we reasoned that there must be a house and a road to it. After a time we found the way, and on telling our pitiful story were instantly admitted. The good people promptly attended to our wants, and, under genial influences, our spirits soon revived. We learned that we were at Luibeg Cottage, and that it was marvellous we had so reached it. The thermometer that night fell to 14° F., showing 18° of frost; so had we not found shelter, it would have been a very serious matter, as, moreover, there was a heavy fall of snow during the night.

The snow had not left off in the morning when we bade farewell to our hospitable entertainers. *En route* for civilisation we presented sorry figures—clothes torn, boots with toes out and parted soles, while some of us limped painfully. The lady showed unmistakable signs of nervousness for a time; R— had a stiffened tendon for a week; the writer had to bear the trials of rheumatism—a lighter toll than might have been expected after such exposure and hardships. But the views had been truly magnificent; we had seen Nature in a grim Arctic mood, in her clothing of purest white, calling to our minds the noble words of the Benedicite:—"O all ye works of the Lord; O ye Sun and Moon; O ye Winds of God; O ye Fire and Heat; O ye

Frost and Cold ; O ye Ice and Snow ; O ye Mountains and Hills ; bless ye the Lord : praise Him and magnify Him for ever" !



ON AONACH BEAG.