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NIGHTS AND DAYS ON THE CAIRNGORMS.

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"'TIS not the distance but the pace that kills", and I have often thought that a mountain excursion would have in it much less of fatigue and much more of enjoyment if there were not so large an amount of physical exertion to be got through in so short a time, and if there were more opportunity of leisurely survey of interesting views. The inconvenience and comparative discomfort of early starting we all know, the greater inconvenience and even occasional disaster of over late return we may have experienced with dismay or read of with commiseration. I tried last year the experiment of an overnight start, sleeping for a time after dinner, and then starting my walk instead of making my customary retirement. Of course a walk through the darkness of night is possible only on a good road, and so this method is of limited application.

CAIRN TOUL AND BRAERLACH.—My first experience of it was at the end of July, on a night of full moon. I was at Coylum Bridge shortly after 10 p.m., and took the southerly road which in about seven miles leads to the head of Glen Eunach. After passing the east side of Tullochgrue I entered the woodlands of the Rothiemurchus Forest. Here I found the moonlight a doubtful benefit, for with the full moon in front and the strong shadows of the trees across the path it was often difficult to see the details of

the ground. At the "Outlook" I quitted the woodland region and entered upon the wilder glen proper. Here I noticed how curiously the moon lighted up blocks of grey granite lying on the black peat banks; indeed at one place I left the road and splashed stumblingly through a bog to investigate what I thought was a strangely steady will-o'-the-wisp. The glen was very quiet, except for the unresting rush of the water; besides it I heard the faint sighing of the wind, and those queer, eerie, inexplicable sounds that gently whisper through the darkness of those remote solitudes—sounds like voices, like laughter, like music, but all on a dainty, fairy-like scale; and I partly understood the powerful effect their accumulated influence might have on a sensitive imagination, and I could well believe the story told of a youthful watcher in this glen who fled from it in terror, and never again dared to spend the night there. When I had passed the lower bothy, three miles from the head of the glen, I saw that thick clouds enshrouded the higher hills; soon the moon was hidden, and I walked in darkness. Nearing the upper bothy, I quitted the glen, and struck up the eastern corrie, Coire Dhonndail. This was very dark, and in its upper part, where I entered the mist, I was quite unable to see the track or the deer that barked on either hand at my approach. The track makes zig-zags in order to surmount the rocks over which two burns fall. Guided by the sound of the waterfalls, I managed to gain the upper part of the track and surmount the only difficult bit of ground. This I cleared at 2.15 a.m., and started eastwards across the great undulating plateau. Here the darkness was complete; I could not even see the face of my compass, and, yielding naturally to the slope of the ground, I went somewhat too far south. The first burn I came across warned me of this, and, recovering from my divergence, I bore somewhat upwards, and soon reached the edge of the crags that overlook the huge cavity of the Garbh Coire, the great hollow between Cairn Toul and Braeriach. Following the crag edge to the south and east, at 3.45 a.m. I reached the summit of Sgor an Lochan Uaine. This

commands a superb view; but when I was on it I could see but a few feet in any direction, and was closely enwrapped in dense mist that was but gently moved by the slight wind. The silence was broken by only two sounds, the continual roar of the Dee falls, a mile away across the corrie, and the occasional croak of a ptarmigan somewhere below me. Quitting my elevated perch I followed the crag edge still eastward, but yet quite unable to see more than my immediate surroundings, and was soon toiling up the rough pile of granite blocks that constitute the upper part of Cairn Toul. I reached the summit cairn (4241) at 4.40 a.m., considerably after sunrise, but the mist shut out all direct sunshine, and made a dim, ghostly twilight. I remained on the top ridge of Cairn Toul for two hours, some of the time sitting in the lee of the cairn, then strolling to the southern cairn or to the northward horn of the mountain. I hoped the mist would clear away, but though the sun from 5.25 onwards made many attempts to break through, it did not do more than show a pale face, and I turned away disappointed, for the summit of Cairn Toul is one of the finest view-points in the Cairngorms. Dropping behind Sgor an Lochain Uaine, I returned to the Garbh Coire crags on its west side, and leisurely walked along their edge, having now in the thinning mist a better chance of looking down the many savage gullies with which the crags are seamed. When I reached the innermost recess of the southern part of the Garbh Coire I quitted the crag edge and made my way up to the March Cairn (4149). This I reached at 8.10 a.m. As I did so, a ray of brilliant sunshine streamed down; in a moment the mist was rent into rags; these disappeared in a very few seconds, and the whole plateau was clear, and quivering in a blaze of fierce sun heat. The sudden change from the chill and comparative darkness of the mist to the absolute clearness and brilliance of the intense sunlight and heat was dramatic and delightful. I had now no more need to walk warily, but could stroll at ease, and enjoy the fine views spread in every direction. My steps turned naturally to the adjacent Wells of Dee, the highest

and ultimate source of that river, and, I believe, the highest stream source in the country. Here at a height of more than 4000 feet the limpid water wells up in some half-dozen places from the granite gravel, and, sweet and cold, gives rise in a few yards to a burn of considerable size. At the highest well-eye I had years before arranged some granite blocks to form a seat, and there I now sat, took a meal, and then, wrapping my head in my cape to shut out the exuberant light and heat, I slept a well-earned and delightful sleep. In an hour I was again afoot, and returned to the edge of the Garbh Coire crags, a place that has a great fascination for me. In full view were all the giants, Ben Muich Dhui, Braeriach, Cairn Toul, and Cairngorm, with in several places patches of the winter's snow still persisting, though almost visibly diminishing in the great heat of the sun. Under the summit of Cairn Toul nestled the Lochan Uaine in its high basin. As I appeared on the crag edge I startled a few deer in the higher part of the corrie below, and, sitting on the edge, I watched them through the field glass as they trotted into the lower part of the corrie with many backward glances for the foe who followed not. Continuing my crag walk, I approached the Dee falls, whose musical roar filled the air. Looking into the depths of the corrie, my eye was caught by a curious shimmer of light on a pool of peaty water some 600 feet below me. Examining with the glass, I had the prettiest sight of the day. A score of deer were at their morning bath, and I watched the process with much interest. The deer stepped down into the pool, and, dipping their muzzles deep into the water, shook their heads about, at the same time trampling rapidly with their fore feet; thus all the head got a good sluicing. Then, lying down, they rolled back and forth in the water, kicking their legs, and throwing the water violently about. Then, springing up, they stepped out of the pool, and pranced about as if to shake themselves free from the wet. On their entry they were of a fine russet brown, but the peat changed them to a dull, sombre, almost black colour. One of them was a large stag, and whenever he was

approached by a smaller there was a fierce but brief collision, none venturing to return his attack.

The example of the deer seemed in some respects a good one, and in a few minutes I found a small pool in the Dee, and there, at an elevation of nearly 4000 feet, I took my morning dip, finding the rapidly running water much less cold than I expected; it had then been flowing for nearly a mile exposed to the fierce sun heat. It was now 10.30 a.m., and I was approaching the main mass of Braeriach. After looking down the Falls of Dee, and paying some attention to the curiously indefinite waterparting on this high plateau between Dee water and Spey water, I made my way eastwards up the slope to the Braeriach summit, passing a small mine from which Cairngorm stones had been dug, and from which a few days later a young companion got a very pretty little crystal. A few minutes after 11 a.m. I was at the summit cairn (4248), and, after arranging some stones to afford more complete shelter from the wind, I lay down for another hour's sleep. Then I had a stroll along the ridge of Braeriach, perhaps the finest mountain of the group. For a mile in length the mountain ridge is as the top of a gigantic wall, at its narrowest not twelve yards wide. On either side the ground falls precipitously, and huge buttresses of naked rock make a scene of superb grandeur and stern impressiveness. The near view of the Garbh Coire, with Cairn Toul and Sgor an Lochain Uaine on the other side, is singularly fine, and in the limpid atmosphere every detail was perfectly clear. Feeling that my experiment had received its ample reward, I turned away, quitting the mountain by the eastward of its northern arêtes, which is not so good a route, however, as the western one. Then leisurely walking down the valley of the Little Bennie, gathering white heather and wild berries as I went, I reached the glen road at the lower bothy, and by it returned, to find myself in good time for afternoon tea, and, thanks to the leisurely style of my 17½ hours' outing, not at all fatigued.

CAIRNGORM AND BEN MUICH DHUI.—I had been so

highly pleased with my night-and-day visit to Cairn Toul and Braeriach, that I decided to take the first clear night about the middle of August for a similar visit to Cairngorm and Ben Muich Dhui. Accordingly, one moonless night when the clearness of the sky and the brilliance of the stars suggested frost, I passed Coylum Bridge just before midnight, and took the road to Glenmore Lodge. The tingle of my hands and face plainly told of frost, and the bright tracks of meteors added to the glory of the heavens. Beyond Glenmore Lodge the usual path for the ascent of Cairngorm winds its way through a dense wood. I was not at all familiar with this part of my route, having rarely gone over the track, and it was perhaps as much by good luck as by good guidance that I safely cleared the wood, and reached the open mountain side about 2 a.m. The sky was even more brilliantly dotted with stars, the Milky Way was beautifully clear, while toward the east there was a forecasting of approaching day. The light was quite useless for walking purposes, and I simply practised the "heather-step" till more light came. Away to the north through the darkness of the distance came flashes of a lighthouse, in groups of six, that I afterwards identified as Tarbet Ness. When daylight began to strengthen I could see all the valley of the Spey and the low ground east of Boat of Garten filled with irregular pools of cotton-woolly mist. Then Loch Morlich, at the foot of Cairngorm, half covered itself with mist, and the line of its outflowing stream declared itself through the forest by a long white snake of mist. And now the eastern sky was rapidly getting bright, and the scattered wisps of cloud there were vividly touched with red and orange. At five minutes after four a.m. I reached the summit cairn of Cairngorm (4084), had a brief interview with the fat brown mouse that is resident guardian there, and had the misfortune to break my flask on a mercilessly hard granite block, and so lose my morning coffee. My attention was now almost entirely given to the sunrise, for the sky got brighter and brighter, and I was on the outlook to note both the time and the place of the sun's appearance.

According to the teaching of the C.T.C., the sun was due to appear about 4.53 a.m., but I saw its first peep at 4.42, and its disc was entirely clear of apparent contact at 4.47½. The first glance of the sun was at the north base of Tap o' Noth, and its last contact was with the summit of Buck of Cabrach, both these hills being a few degrees further north than E.N.E.

Walking now eastwards from the cairn, and descending a little on the northern face, I visited the Fuaran a' Mharcuis, the Marquis' Well, the highest spring on Cairngorm, and added a few stones to the "leading cairn" that marks its position. Then, still going in the same general direction, I descended into Ciste Mhairearaid, Margaret's Chest or Coffin. This is a small corrie overlooking the upper part of the Nethy, and is notable as always containing snow. I found three patches of snow in it, two of them small, and one that measured 286 paces in its roughly circular outline. Quitting the corrie at its southern side, I went to the south-east corner of Cairngorm that overlooks the outlet of Loch Avon. Here I was on ground that offered feeding for deer, and I kept a good look-out for them. I was rewarded by coming on a herd of seventeen. Only one of them was on foot, and it had evidently but just risen, for it was not yet 6 a.m. Lying behind some convenient rocks, I had a leisurely view of the deer, and by a sharp whistle brought several more to their feet. As they could see no cause for further alarm, and as the wind was blowing from them to me, they stretched their legs, and fell to nibbling the grass. But a second whistle and the wave of a handkerchief brought them all up in a startled clump, and when I stepped from my hiding into full view, they trotted down the hill-side and I saw them no more. I then went to the edge of the mountain overlooking Loch Avon. Here the mountain descends some 900 feet, in places precipitously and in places by steep gorges. The view of the lake as I strolled along the edge of the upland was very fine. Down in the hollow the air was evidently still, for the surface of the water was a perfect mirror, reflecting every little detail of

the surrounding rocks, and the varied colouring of plants, cloud, and sky. The trout were leaping freely, and from the opposite side swam across three grey birds. The highest rocks overlook the middle of the loch, and here, finding a very inviting corner, I lay amid the blaeberreries and slept for half-an-hour. Towards the upper end of the loch I descended one of the gorges, and had a pleasant swim in the beautifully clear water. At the head of the loch is a little space of comparatively level ground, thickly covered with varied grasses, heathers, and ferns, and intersected by the brattling lower course of the Garbh Uisge, the Rough Water, which, with its tributary the Feith Buidhe Burn, dashes over the steep rocks at the head of the glen. Crossing the Garbh Uisge near the loch, I made my way through fallen blocks to the famous Shelter Stone. Under this mighty tumbled fragment of a crag is a cavity large enough to shelter half-a-dozen people, and, though draughty and at times damp, it is in pretty frequent use by hillmen. Just inside the entrance passage my eye was caught by a paper under a "paper weight". This was a brief note from some recent visitors to "Dear next chap", inviting him to make use of provisions they had left, and greeting him with good wishes. Investigating their stores, I found they included an assortment of tinned meats, tea, sugar, a kettle, and a mug. I at once proceeded to remedy the loss of my cold coffee by making a large brewing of tea. I also sampled a most excellent "Cyclist's paté" contained in one of the tins. I now decided to return to the higher level by scrambling up along the right bank of the Garbh Uisge, an interesting and by no means difficult route. The whole slope was thickly covered with a great variety of Alpine and sub-Alpine plants, and the stream came down in a splendid series of leaps and dashes. Just after leaving the Shelter Stone I stepped into the shadow of the Sticil, the great crag from which it fell. The change from sunlight to shadow was so striking that I turned to look up at the crag, and saw a very beautiful sight. The top edge of the crag was outlined in a vivid silver band, and flying outwards over it were multitudes

of brilliantly shining silver sparks that fell through the air and disappeared as they entered the shadow. When I had finished my climb I went to the top of the crag, 1000 feet vertically above the Shelter Stone, and though I could see nothing to explain the display of "fireworks", I did get a most impressive view of Loch Avon and the corrie in which it is embosomed. I now turned my face towards the summit of Ben Muich Dhui, following the glen of the Garbh Uisge, a fine typical plateau glen, with several pretty lochans in it, and nine large patches of snow on its rocky sides. On my way I diverged to the east side of the little glen to look down on Loch Etchachan, near which comes up the path from Glen Derry. At the highest source of the Garbh Uisge, at mid-day, I sat for lunch, and while there saw four men coming up by the path. They startled, but did not see, two deer that ran across the face of the hill just above me. I was at the summit cairn (4296), some few minutes before the others came up, and found them to be youths not acquainted with the Ben and its surroundings, nor, apparently, with the friendly courtesy that might be expected at such a meeting. However, they accepted such information as I proffered, and one of them, thawing, thanked me for what I told them. And indeed it was a grand day for the summit. The air was of crystal clearness, and everything that ever can be seen from that height was perfectly in view. To specify what could be seen would be to catalogue most of Scottish mountains, but the supreme item was the Garbh Coire, surrounded by the crags of Cairn Toul and Braeriach, and opening into the long trench of the Larig Ghru. This scene cannot be described. It must be viewed, and the more one sees it the more does one want to see it again. I doubt whether it can be excelled in the country. My programme included a sleep at the summit cairn, but the presence of other visitors made this impossible, and though I tried to get a nap at the northern cairn, half-a-mile away, I found the couch too rough and the sun too hot. But from this neighbourhood I had a very fine view of the glens in which flow the streams forming the Garbh Uisge,

and the undulations of the great plateau. The afternoon was now wearing on, and it behoved me to turn my steps homeward. I crossed the plateau in a northerly direction, passing between the head waters of the March Burn and the Feith Buidhe lochan, waters flowing to the Dee and the Avon respectively, and then descended to lower levels along the stream at the back of the Lurcher's Crag. My last bit of rough walking was through the tiresome long heather in the northern mile of the Larig Ghru. Then smoother roads took me home to the refreshing bath and tea that pleasantly closed my long wanderings of 18½ hours.

In conclusion, in view of what has happened on Cairngorm since I was there, it may be well to say that not anyone and everyone should attempt such walks. No one should take chances on a mountain; and people who do not know a mountain, and who go without guide, without compass, without map, and without sufficient provisions, court disaster, and not seldom meet with it. Each year the Cairngorms take their toll of such foolish people, and yet each year fresh victims voluntarily offer themselves. Mountaineering, even of the mild type herein described, is a fascinating form of holiday play, and, rightly attempted, is highly beneficial to body, mind, and spirit. But, like all sports, it has its laws, unwritten though they be, and "outsiders" must not think they can rashly and carelessly violate these with impunity.