

ANOTHER NIGHT IN THE LARIG.

By J. W. PUTTRELL.

HURRAH for Scotland! This was certainly the heart feeling, if not the actual expression, of a merry pair of mountaineers bound for the Cairngorms. My friend, Mr. E. A. Baker, and I had in previous years learnt to love and respect Bonnie Scotland, particularly from a scansorial point of view; hence our eager, almost boyish anticipation of another good time within her borders. Of a truth, there is a subtle fascination about Scotland's hills, peculiarly undefinable in character, but which, to the mountaineer of either the "Munro" or the "Mummery" type, is real and irresistible. Nature, in wonderful beneficence, has dealt lavishly with our kinsmen north of the border, for have they not received the lion's share of her gifts in possessing the highest mountain, the highest pass, and the loftiest and most extensive mountain chain in Great Britain, not to mention other records of equal significance? Our Glencoe visit of May, 1900, in company with George and Ashley Abraham, of Keswick, left nothing to be desired, the record-bag on that occasion including, as it did, the first direct ascent of the Crowberry Ridge on the Buchaille Etive Mor, one of the longest and most hazardous rock-climbs in the British Isles. This season, 1901, however, we were tempted to try our luck elsewhere, hoping to find an excellent substitute for Glencoe, that Eldorado of ambitious cragsmen, in and among the rocky facets of the Cairngorms, near Aviemore.

"The best laid schemes o' mice an' men gang aft agley", says Burns, and so events proved in this instance. At the outset, owing to the Exhibition attractions at Glasgow, and an uneventful, albeit pleasurable, stay of several days in Arran, our visit, unfortunately, verged too near the shooting season to allow the possibility of free access to the mountains. How we longed to taste the

forbidden fruit, to creep unobserved through the deer preserves or sanctuaries, and touch the distant rocks, which so magnificently sentinelled the semi-sacred enclosures. This was not to be, however, for even in such a remote and highly aristocratic region as, say, Glen Eunach, law and order must be respected, even by the harmless, innocent-looking "mountain-pounder". Where the open-door policy prevailed, however, we found, to our regret, the granite rocks very unsatisfactory to handle, totally different from the splendid porphyry of Glencoe. Contact with the crags of Braeriach, and especially the smooth, sloping slabs of the Lurcher's Rock (Creag na Leacainn), plainly demonstrated the futility of seriously attempting new work, however fascinating, without a third man on the rope. Frankly, in several of our attacks, we found discretion the better part of valour, our feeling and sentiment being happily summarised in a new version of an old adage—

" He who climbs and runs away
Lives to climb another day."

Bearing this in mind, we decided to go over the hills and far away, to Lochnagar, of Royal fame, there to see the sights and take stock of the climbing round and about Lochnagar Corrie, that amphitheatre of granite rock, so frequently and enthusiastically referred to by writers in this and other magazines.

And hereby hangs a tale, and one I would unfold as gracefully as my simple Saxon will permit. Of course, aspiration and attainment are two totally different things. We wished, for instance, to see Lochnagar, a devoutly honest wish on our part, but the desire, as subsequent events only too sadly proved, was not to be fulfilled. Having taken the precaution to forward a change of raiment to Braemar, in anticipation of possible bad weather, we started out from Coylum Bridge at 9.30 a.m., intending to spend the afternoon on Braeraich, and afterwards to return to the Larig Ghru. There we were to repose over night under the "broad canopy of Heaven", prior to

completing the latter portion of our journey. Briefly, then, this was our intended plan of campaign. It was friend Baker's happy suggestion to spend the night in this famous Pass, and the idea naturally attracted the writer, who foresaw the possibility of adventure therein. The warning note of a friendly Sheffielder, as to the terrible Larig, was, at the moment, contemptuously ignored, for, thought we, what was the Pass to us adventurers bold, who had braved the terrors of the Bottomless Pit in Derbyshire! Try not the Pass? Absurd! *We* would try it, anyway! Therefore, crossing the Druie by the stone bridge, we soon entered Rothiemurchus Forest by the regulation path leading to the "gruesome" Larig. The forest was wrapt in gloom, for as yet the morning sunlight had not penetrated into its darkling depths. To us city men, the death-like silence of the woods was deeply impressive: no sound reached the ear, not even the desolate plaint of the wood-pigeon. In whichever direction we turned, no life-like movement was apparent, except in and around the cone-shaped ant-hills, upon which, in silent activity, the myriad tiny insects were displaying their marvellous architectural skill. Some of these nest erections, it is worthy of note, were abnormally large, measuring quite four feet in height, affording ample evidence of the assiduous toil and patience of the minute master-builders. Overhead, we observed rain-laden clouds rolling heavily across the sky; this fact, coupled with a slump in the barometer, betokened anything but journeying mercies throughout the remainder of the day. Heedless, however, of these ominous signs of bad weather, we sped merrily along the beaten track, forcing our way as best we could through the luxuriant growth of heather and ferns. Throughout its sinuous turnings, this narrow, trench-like path was thickly bestrewn with boulders of varied shapes and sizes, and these, with a liberal distribution of projecting tree-roots artfully secreted 'neath the overlapping juniper, made things decidedly warm for our shin bones, besides preventing the maintainance of that natural swing, the sure sign of the active mountaineer. In this irregular,

happy-go-lucky style we proceeded apace through the forest glade, encountering other slight hindrances, such as giant pine trees which had recently been uprooted by the forest storms, and hurled athwart the path like so many sticks or skittles. Now a veritable Slough of Despond confronted us, every step across which had to be measured and tested, or, for our remissness, we paid the penalty of sinking up to our knees in the treacherous, miry swamps. We were not to be daunted, however, by the intervention of these minor obstacles, for we had now reached the open moorland, and our eyes were intently fixed on the vista, which, for the first time during the journey, unrolled itself in complete splendour before our gaze. The grandly elevated panoramic view was eminently Scottish in conformation. Where not moss-clad, or mantled with heather, the moorland for miles around was bespread, to our delight, with fruit, ripe, for our acceptance, in the shape of luscious bilberries, crowberries, and big red cranberries, which ran riot everywhere in prodigal profusion. As we approached the entrance to the Pass, we observed the twin-shaped hills of Carn Elrick (on the right) and Castle Hill (on the left) keeping watch in lonely grandeur, like the ancient Japanese Nios, or Temple-guards, set to ward off the attack of evil spirits. Beyond these outposts, east and west, the higher ramparts of the Cairngorms reared themselves in savage grandeur into the clouds, the topmost crags being visible at intervals as the swirling mists rolled away. A few more minutes of now fairly easy going brought us into the Larig proper. The track hereabouts zig-zagged upward along the burn side, and anon by the flat-topped moraine heaps, the latter interesting relics of a bygone ice-age. Although we had reached the altitude of 1800 feet, massive bastions of rock towered high above us. The wet, mossy slabs on the left glistened in the morning sunlight, and beyond, away up the hill side, we espied the big chimney, dark and cavernous in aspect, which only the previous forenoon had refused us admittance. Picking up the two rugs, our sole bedding outfit, and the A.C. ropes, which had been planted the day before, we trudged quickly

along, hoping thereby to prolong our stay on Braeriach. The path grew very indistinct and irregular, prior to reaching the March Burn (2300 feet). Thinking, therefore, the locality suitable for our evening's bivouac, and one withal sheltered from the prevalent sou' wester, we at 1 p.m. cached our impedimenta of rugs, tinned-rabbit, jam, etc., the better to survey the situation, and, if possible, select a recess or cave wherein to pass the night. Of accommodation, even of the most primitive kind, there was none, for, minutely as we searched over the chaotic wilderness of rock, no kindly harbour of refuge opened to our gaze. Would that by some mighty titanic power the hospitably renowned "Shelter Stone" could be transplanted and placed at our service for the night! This, and similar Utopian ideas, forced themselves upon our imaginations as we realised our homeless condition in this, the highest mountain pass in Great Britain! It was, indeed, "Hobson's choice" after all, nothing for it, in fact, but to prepare for a real night out, so, returning to the cache, we there made a gite or shelter, by edging two prominent, angular masses of granite with an irregular wall of boulders, this to act, as we hoped, as a slight protection against the elements. Having put our house in order, to use a homely phrase, we light-heartedly hied our way along the brae-side to the right (*Sron na Leirg*) until, finally, we emerged at the Larig end of the Braeriach crags. The precipice walk along the edge of these stupendous cliffs, and the unique views into the rock-girt hollow of *An Garbh-choire*, were experiences long to be remembered. It is not at all pleasing to disparage the sights and scenes of one's own native land, yet I am bound to admit that, from a spectacular point of view, the rock scenery hereabouts shows up to advantage against anything in Snowdonia or Cumberland. A narrow chimney particularly took our fancy, but the wind, blowing great guns, and rapidly increasing in violence, effectively weaned us away from the spot; so taking a direct route down a boulder-strewn ridge, we soon gained the lower end of *An Garbh-choire*. We would fain have lingered to view in

detail the surrounding scenery, but we were naturally anxious to reach our quarters in the Larig before night-fall. We noticed, however, with great interest, the contrasting forms of landscape, the graceful aspect of Cairn Toul on the south, with its pretty lakelet nestling peacefully 'neath its high towers of silence; on the north, the rock-riven escarpment of Braeriach at the head of the desolate-looking An Garbh-choire, bleak and bare, showing, all too clearly, sad traces of the destroying hand of Time. Later, whilst enjoying a repast of bilberries and chocolate, it occurred to us that in this treeless waste, if we wanted a fire in the Larig, we must commence forthwith to gather the necessary fuel. Everything combustible, therefore, was commandeered, especially the dried roots and stems of the juniper. Luckily, we came across several small, but invaluable, branches, and, with these strapped on our backs, continued our way over the rugged slope, for all the world like merry hunters returning from the chase. We reached our home in the Pass about 6 p.m. The task of making the fire, and securing refreshing drinks of hot coffee and bovril, was soon accomplished. Baker was the handy man on this occasion, and right royally did he act his part. As for the writer, he merely cracked jokes, chiefly at the expense of the new cook, and generally made things hum, especially so when, early in the proceedings, to his chagrin, he found he had opened his thumb instead of the rabbit-tin! Immersion, however, in a cold stream near by, and a little bandaging, soon rectified this stupid blunder. Whilst feasting to the full on boiled rabbit, sardines, tinned pears, etc., we regretfully noticed the appearance of rain. Anticipating events, therefore, we hurriedly finished our meal, and, packing our surplus stock of eatables into the rucksacks, prepared to settle down finally for the night. A rock floor, however, is not an ideal bed whereon to lie; therefore, to improve, and if possible, effeminise, the settling-down process, we gathered a few bunches of grass and fern leaves. These we spread on the ground, and covered over with one of the rugs. With the remaining rug we rigged up an awning, but, finding it

unserviceable and unstable, we decided to use it as a top sheet instead. Having well fuelled the camp fire, and feeling ready to turn in for the evening, time 8.30 p.m., we, by mutual arrangement, tossed for choice of position. The spin of the coin resulted in a lucky win for the writer, who, taking advantage of it, accepted the inner berth nearest the boulder. The rain now came down in earnest, and night closing in upon us, with its almost Egyptian darkness, made us realise our luckless condition. Hour succeeded hour in dreary monotony. Meanwhile, the clouds emptied themselves from a leaden sky as copiously as ever. This we could tell by the increased volume in the streamlet that was burrowing its way underneath the rocks hard by, the gurgling sound of which gradually increased from a thin, musical ripple to a deep turbulent roar. To picture accurately the situation and our feelings in cold print would almost be an impossibility. As we peered with wet faces from out our strange resting-place, the night's outlook appeared cheerless in the extreme, for the moon failed to "lift her lamp on high", and the stars were extinguished in the firmament. The wind, however, was strongly in evidence. We were, indeed, caught napping by "Boreas rude", in that he hurled and swirled the aqueous clouds *up* the Pass instead of down, a change of course quite unexpected, and one we were totally unprepared for at the time. Bedrenched and comfortless in the extreme, we cheerily stuck to our posts. About 1 a.m., however, the rain poured down in torrents, and the temperature, falling to almost freezing point, made things decidedly uncomfortable, to say the least. We now began seriously to consider our position. Should we hold on till morning, or should we evacuate our unpleasant quarters? These, and other queries, were seriously discussed, as we lay awake, shivering in the night air. However, we heroically decided to sit tight till morning, come what might. At last the hour of five arrived. The sky was still leaden with rain-clouds, and the aspect was anything but encouraging. We shook off the blanket, which was thoroughly saturated. Baker, as the outer man, was first

to rise, and I eagerly followed, both of us thankful to stretch our limbs and exercise ourselves, even though wet to the skin. Our first idea was to make a fire. We went straight for our stock of fuel, but, alas! the incessant rains had made it useless for the purpose intended, in spite of our elaborate precaution overnight. This was indeed a serious matter, stark and stiff as we were, needing stimulant to carry us on our remaining 10 hours journey to Braemar. However, there was nothing else for it but to sample what provisions we had in the rucksack, which had safely guarded the contents during the night's exposure. We gathered up the rugs, safely cached them away near the gite, along with our cooking utensils, and at once pressed on towards Braemar. We soon reached the summit of the Pass, and down we went on the far side, until, arriving opposite the Devil's Point, we held a council of war as to the advisability of proceeding further. We could hardly make up our minds to beat a retreat, but, eventually, we decided on so doing. This discretion was, indeed, the better part of valour taking everything into consideration, the weather, as much as anything, influencing us in the decision. Retracing our steps to the col, we made for the gite, which we found with some difficulty. We had a little more lunch, and, strapping the rugs and other impedimenta on our backs, made for home. Baker found his load anything but light, so we made a halt, and planted his rug and rucksack in an adjacent cranny, to be called for later, I doing likewise with my rug, which I also found inconveniently heavy. Unburdened somewhat as we were, we exuberantly romped down the Pass, reaching, at last, the Rothiemurchus Forest with its tantalising pathway. This, I confess, troubled us more than usual, for naturally we were not in the best of condition after our recent experience. However, we made light of the mazy $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles of forest track, ultimately arriving about midday at Coylum Bridge, happily, as it proved, none the worse for our adventure in the famous Larig Ghru.