

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF THE CAIRNGORMS.

BY WILLIAM SMITHARD.

ONE marked advantage of the Scottish railways to the tourist is the absence of tunnels; although heavy gradients abound, one may travel in North Britain for hundreds of miles without being deprived of daylight or annoyed by sulphurous fumes; and nowhere did we appreciate this more than on our journey over the Highland Railway through the Grampians.

The scenery surprised us; we had been led to expect a desolation and a monotony that would be depressing and wearisome, but somehow we could not conjure up the prescribed feelings. It is true there is no beauty as ordinarily understood, but the league-stretched, endless-seeming hills made a picture of vastness and expanse that was decidedly to our taste, and the warm evening light mellowed and enriched the rough vegetation on the rolling slopes, quite freeing them from the charge of cheerless barrenness. Then, again, the repetition of the same features seemed only fitting in such a stern landscape, as many blows are required to drive a big nail home; and a further appeal was made to the imagination by the past history of the region; it is one of Nature's disused workshops; everywhere are signs of glacial action on an immense scale, and the innumerable moraine heaps are the lasting monuments of tremendous forces long since dissipated.

It was some time after sunset when we reached Aviemore, and we walked three miles by starlight to Loch an Eilein, where a cottage was to be our headquarters for a few days. Seen the morning after our arrival, the loch was perfectly beautiful; in the foreground is the tiny island, with its fragment of ruined castle almost overgrown with luxuriant bushes. The shores are belted with fir trees, and beyond them rises the majestic form of Cairngorm, with subsidiary mountains.



An hour's walking along a cart-track through the forest brought us in sight of the Larig Ghru. The sky was heavy with cumulus clouds, about 3000 feet high, drifting slowly from the south, and enveloping the tops of the loftier mountains. The bare cone of Carn Elrick was quite clear; beyond it, over Glen Eunach, the steep black cliffs of Sgoran Dubh showed plainly, but the summit was obscured. In the foreground of the Larig is an undulating stretch of forest, carpeted with heather, which is picked out with rushes here and there in the boggy places, and also shows patches of green or golden bracken.

The shape of the pass is like the section of a gigantic bowl, beautifully regular, formed by the sloping sides of Braeriach on the western and Ben Muich Dhui on the eastern side. On the tops of those mountains the clouds were heavy and opaque, but in the bowl of the pass itself they were permeated with sunlight, thus getting an exquisite pearly luminosity, while their movements now and then revealed patches of azure background. The sweeping lines of the bowl were broken in just one place by the slight protrusion of the black spiky tops of a couple of pine trees, and altogether the scene was one of almost ethereal beauty. The view is hidden as we plunge once more into the forest by a narrow foot-track through the soft peat, but soon we get a peep into a small but lovely glen, of which the path skirts the eastern slopes; through it the stream from the Larig Ghru falls rapidly, and on the sides are masses of the grey foliage of the birch on a dusky background, studded with a few small firs. This is a glen within a glen, as it were; the stream has cut its way deep down through the moraine heaps, forming a rift where the birches are well sheltered, but on the wide open ground on each side above the tiny glen the pines as usual monopolise nearly all the available space.

Rising rapidly, we are soon on the southern edge of the forest, and all luxuriance is left behind. Castle Hill (the eastern counterpart of Carn Elrick), covered with white boulders, is on our left, and, separated from it by a dip is the much higher Lurcher's Crag, a shoulder of



Cairngorm. We are now well within the pass, which narrows quickly as we get between the stupendous cliffs which close in from either side; presently we come to a wilderness of big boulders, over which we pick our way with mincing steps for an hour or so before reaching the "col" or summit of the pass. It would, however, be impossible to lose one's way, as the precipices towering above do not permit of any unintentional side issues, and the only exit is towards Deeside, unless the traveller elects to do some stiff rock-climbing. We obtained a grand view from the head of the pass; and one advantage of doing the Larig Ghru is that a plentiful supply of pure cold water is available all the way—a great boon to the thirsty traveller.

Next day was devoted to Ben Muich Dhui and Cairngorm. Leaving the Larig Ghru between Castle Hill and the Lurcher's Crag, we ascended the ridge of the latter. Fine views opened out as we rose; north-west the new hotel at Aviemore showed its white walls conspicuously, and beyond it were the low hills of Monadh Liath range, in black shadow; due north and close at hand was a range of small heights, broken by several shallow corries, and culminating in Meall a' Bhuachaille, between which and Mam Suim is a pass leading in a north-easterly direction to the flat country of Strath Nethy, and beyond that are more and more hills. They were all clear of the clouds, which lay close together in long parallel lines just above the summits, like a series of blinds each rolled up a little higher than the one below. In the foreground was the immense forest of Rothiemurchus, looking very dark in spite of the brilliant sunshine, with its gem-like Loch an Eilein and Loch Morlich.

An hour and a half's easy walking brought us to the top of the Lurcher's Crag; the view north and west was maintained, but Cairngorm and Ben Muich Dhui were covered with clouds; Sgoran Dubh, however, was quite clear, and beyond it could be seen Ben Nevis and the Glencoe Mountains quite plainly, so we had every encouragement to proceed. It took us two hours longer to reach the summit of Ben Muich Dhui, and by that time



all the mountains were free of clouds. We were delighted to get to the top after the seemingly endless up-and-down walk over the sand and boulders of the plateau. On the summit is a good cairn, surrounded by a ring of smaller ones, like a priest and his acolytes.

Immensity and contrast are the keynotes of the view ; rotundity terminates abruptly in precipices, and grey rounded boulders give way to black, steep crags. Scores of mountains, of all shapes and sizes, are around, but it would take a whole day to identify them. To the north, terminating the plateau on which we stand, is the huge bald and rounded top of Cairngorm. Between us and it is a series of mounds or steppes, covered with boulders and sand, very gaunt in the fierce sunlight, and looking much more like a sea-beach left bare by the receding tide than a mountain summit. A short walk westward brings us over the precipices of the Larig Ghru, which are still more impressive now seen from above, and on the other side of the pass are the steep and savage corries of Braeriach and Cairn Toul.

An hour is all too short to realise the scene in the fulness of its grandeur, but it was after three o'clock, and six hours' walking still lay between us and home.

The walk over the plateau to Cairngorm is very fine, disclosing grand corries and precipices hitherto unseen. Midway between the two summits, and 1500 feet below, on our right, was Loch Avon. Only a small dip is involved between the Ben and Cairngorm, but our muscles rebelled a little at the call upon them to take us up the latter, and we were glad that it concluded our climbing for the day. We descended in a north-westerly direction, by a regular and easy track that gives no variety, and in an hour and a half reached Glenmore Lodge.

Our last excursion in the Cairngorm district was to Sgoran Dubh and Braeriach. From the east end of Loch an Eilein we climbed the steep face of Creag Dubh, after passing through the desolate remains of a portion of the forest which was devastated by fire some years ago. The morning was dull and cloudy,



but we had fine views of the loch, and saw its island to great advantage from Cadha Mor. We went southward along the lofty ridge which forms the western wall of Glen Eunach. A slight dip, followed by a sharp rise, brought us to the cairn on Sgoran Dubh in just over three hours from the time of starting. Sgoran Dubh's eastern face drops almost sheer down for 2000 feet to Loch Eunach; this face is seamed with a number of wide gullies, divided by black and broken craggy arêtes, and when the mist blew over at intervals we looked right down the gullies to the blue surface of the loch, and across to the zigzag paths up Braeriach on the opposite slopes.

At Sgoran Dubh my companion was for turning back on account of the mist, but I wanted to do Braeriach at all hazards, so he decided to continue along with me. We had to make a considerable descent, but the going was quite easy until we got to the head of the glen, when we plunged into the wilderness of moraine heaps that stretches between Glen Feshie and Glen Dee. There is no means of avoiding the heavy labour involved in this part of the walk; no friendly ridge or stream runs in the right direction, and there is nothing for it but to adopt the switch-back method over the heaps, which are interspersed with bogs and tiny lochs.

We were glad to begin the steep climb up to Braeriach. Going steadily up the grassy slope, littered with boulders here and there, we soon entered the mist again, and in a while, after a stiff tug, came to level ground, which was evidently the western plateau of the mountain. Working to compass and map, we made for the northern cairn, and, after walking for about a mile, came right on it, just as the mist lifted for a few moments. From there we struck due east over a slight depression, and presently came to the main or eastern plateau of Braeriach. We were well rewarded for our pains. "Nature did never yet betray the heart that loved her" was the uppermost thought in our minds. Responsive to the fitful gusts of the breeze, the mist rose and fell rapidly, and the glimpses we got down the awful precipices and corries on the northern face of the



mountain were perhaps the more startling for their transitoriness. In our excitement we forgot for awhile to note our direction, and on looking at the compass were rather alarmed to find that we were going south-east instead of north. Our guide-book map did not give much detail, but we came to the conclusion that our south-easterly direction was only a temporary one, due to our having followed the edges of the horse-shoe corries we had been looking at, which had caused us to box the compass in a few minutes. A tiny loch flashed into momentary view high up on the opposite wall of a corrie, but the surroundings were not shown sufficiently to enable us to locate it with certainty. I felt sure that our general direction had been correct, *i.e.*, northerly, so we took that line again, and pushed on rapidly, for it was less than an hour to sunset, and we were not equipped for a night out in such a wild place. Presently we came to a deep declivity, which we descended in suspense, and with keen anxiety to get below the clouds, so as to know whether our judgment had been successfully exercised. To our delight we found we were in the long and grassy Corrie Bennie, which would take us into Glen Eunach, and was our nearest way home, which we reached soon after nightfall.

After dinner we gathered round the glowing peats, Mr. C—— mixing some special farewell toddy, and we spent a delightful hour listening to his racy talk about the big Rothiemurchus world and the little world beyond. Next day we found ourselves in Skye.

I suppose every man, or at least every mountaineer, has two or three landmarks in his career that he always looks back to and measures by. A very prominent one with me is my visit to the Cairngorms.