

## A SUMMER NIGHT ON BEINN A' GHLO.

BY JOHN RITCHIE, LL.B.

"It is high praise to say of this characteristic group that close acquaintance deepens the impression made upon everyone who has admired from a distance the compact, abrupt, and withal massive peaks of Beinn a' Ghlo". In such terms one of the members of the Cairngorm Club who took part in the summer excursion of July, 1893, has recorded his admiration for this fine mountain, and there are few who will not echo his sentiments. The appearance of Beinn a' Ghlo, with its summits towering up so close to each other and the deep dark corries between, is most striking from some point not too distant, as from Ben Vrackie for example, but even from a position much further off it remains a notable feature in the landscape. It is a beautiful sight as viewed from Perth Bridge on any clear day in early summer, when its snow-clad summits glitter in the sun.

I have been up most of the Perthshire mountains, but none of them is so attractive to me as Beinn a' Ghlo. Thus the recollection of a delightful day with William Barclay, in October, 1902, when we made a round from Blair Atholl to Pitlochry, over the four summits of Beinn a' Ghlo and Beinn Bhuirich suggested the idea that a night excursion over part of the same ground would be a pleasant experience on some mild evening in May or June. Accordingly, arrangements were made with two friends, M. and F., for setting out from Perth on an afternoon in May, but rain, which in Scotland nowadays continually maketh sad the heart of man, effectually prevented our leaving home at that time. We then fixed on 14th June, and happily that day proved bright and sunny, so that we confidently looked forward to a genial and balmy night on the mountain, as we set out for Blair Atholl. On our arrival there, however, a chilly feeling in the air indicated that the night might



probably turn out less satisfactory than we anticipated. This fear was confirmed by William Barclay, whom I met at Blair Atholl station on his return from a long excursion to An Sgarsoch and Carn an Fhidleir. On these hills, he informed me, he had encountered during the day a violent snowstorm, which lasted for hours, and coated the Cairngorms in white. However, we comforted ourselves with the belief that the cold snap was passing northward and that we should escape it.

We left Blair Atholl at 11:20 that night, and soon found ourselves swinging along in fine form over the well-known



BEINN A' GHLO, FROM THE SOUTH.

road past Loch Moraig to the foot of Carn Liath. The air was bracing and tonic in the extreme, and as we walked along we all agreed in thinking that this was unquestionably the proper time of day to start on a hill walk. In about an hour we reached the bothy on the left-hand side of the road, and struck across the heather. We soon found the little pathway which, skirting a stone dyke, leads uphill towards a number of shooters' butts. The ascent of Carn Liath by this route is specially suitable for a night



climb. As the hill-slope begins to rise quite near the road, the traveller is saved the possible excitement of floundering in peat bogs in the darkness.

The faint glimmer of the rising moon had been visible as we walked along the road, and now she mounted high over Ben Vrackie, casting a beautiful light on the intervening moorland. We climbed steadily without interruption through the still air. All was quiet save for an occasional gust of wind which blew round the shoulder of the mountain, and the stamping of some sheep which stood silhouetted against the sky-line, angrily protesting against this unseasonable intrusion. Everything promised a delightful night on the hills, and I thought of the pleasure of the walk down the long ridge from the summit of Carn Liath to the Cromalton Pass. As we drew near the top of the mountain, however, the wind became more threatening, and mist began to wreath the hillside. Passing the first guide cairn, we reached the summit about half-past one, and were glad to cower down in the shelter of the cairn on the top till the sleety rain which now began to fall should have passed by. After sitting beside the cairn for about ten minutes, we struck out towards the ridge which leads from Carn Liath towards the next peak, viz., Braigh Coire Chruinn Bhalgairn. This fine ridge is familiar to all who have walked over Beinn a' Ghlo, and is one of the most attractive features of the mountain. It forms a narrow neck, leading one, as it appears, right into the heart of a wild mountain group, and the view looking into the northern corrie of Carn Liath is not readily forgotten. The rain had now ceased, and though the hour was still early there was enough light to enable us to enjoy the grandeur of the surrounding scenery. Other conditions, however, were to make the meditative enjoyment of a fine view more than ordinarily difficult. We had not proceeded more than a hundred yards from the cairn when we got a taste of what was in store. A perfect gale of bitterly cold wind came thundering down on us. We struggled along the ridge as best we could, finding it difficult to keep our feet owing to the force of the storm. The



wind blew without intermission, and, as it seemed to have been passed through a refrigerator ten times refrigerated, we were soon chilled to the marrow. No clothing seemed to afford any protection as the blast swept in at the right side, circled gaily round our bones, and then went howling down the slope to the left.

When we had descended for a considerable distance, the wind seemed to change and blow out of an opposite quarter. We groaned at the thought of its impish ingenuity, but a little reflection showed that it was not the wind that had changed but that a turn in the direction of the ridge (unobserved as we staggered blindly along) had now exposed our left side to the gale. The natural formation of the ground thus played the part of a turnspit, and, when we had been "done brown" on one side, it effectually turned us round on the other. We were not sorry to reach the foot of the hollow between the first and second peaks, and to have a short respite in the famous Cromalton Pass of litigious memory.

The climb from this point to the top of Braigh Coire Chruinn Bhalgain is a gradual and very easy one, and for a time the wind gave us a rest. The mountain stretched before us, lying cold and grey in the light of the approaching dawn, while in the west there was a sky of a blue colour—between cobalt and indigo. As we drew near the summit, however, we got into thick mist (of which we had hitherto had very little), and we were harrassed by the same piercing wind. The cairn on this peak is, however, specially suited for a shelter, and we speedily esconsed ourselves behind it, feeling, as F. said, "starvation warm". It was now nearly three o'clock, and it seemed certain that there would be no sunrise view for us. As this had not been our object in setting out, we were not greatly concerned, and we set ourselves to enjoy our morning meal as best we could. It was so utterly uncomfortable, however, that we resolved to finish our breakfast at Bealach an Fhiodha, where we could have a good supply of water; and, after a stay of ten minutes, we were on our way to the next peak. The mist occasionally cleared as we marched



along, and we were rewarded by some fine glimpses in the direction of Glen Feshie. Suddenly the curtain to the north-west was drawn aside, and An Sgarsoch and Carn an Fhidleir stood out clear to view, with the rolling moorland that lies between them and Glen Tilt. All this country was white with a thin coating of newly-fallen snow. The deep cleft of Glen Tilt was a striking object in the nearer foreground, the steep sides showing a dull deep green colour amid the prevailing white. At another moment the mist partially cleared in the valley on our right, and Airgiod Bheinn with its very steep western slope was dimly seen, looking grander than ever in the uncertainty of its outline.

Beinn a' Ghlo may be compared in shape to a very roughly-formed letter H. One limb is formed by Carn Liath and Braigh Coire Chruinn Bhalgain, while Airgiod Bheinn and Carn nan Gabhar make up the other. The connecting link between these long limbs is a short ridge, which we were now approaching. To reach it we kept on past the summit of Braigh Coire Chruinn Bhalgain, in an easterly direction, till in about ten minutes or a quarter of an hour we reached a collection of very large stones. Here a gentle descent leads to the connecting ridge referred to. Baker and his friend (*C.C.J.*, Vol. IV., p. 16) evidently missed this ridge by keeping on too far to the north-east, till the valley between them and Carn nan Gabhar became deeper and not so easily crossed.

When crossing this connecting ridge we passed near the pools from which Glas Leathad rises, and we would gladly have seated ourselves by these to complete our scanty breakfast, as these pools supply almost the only water to be found on the upper ridges of the mountain. A rest here was not to be thought of, however, as a bitterly cold wind was blowing through this pass as elsewhere, and drove us on like some tormented spirits in Dante's *Inferno*.

We climbed slowly up from the col to the ridge between Carn nan Gabhar and Airgiod Bheinn. Behind us, on the ridge we had just left, lay great wreaths of last year's snow, while in front of us the whole mountain was white



with hoar frost and newly-fallen snow, the older patches showing white through the thin veil which had just fallen. As he gazed on the wintry scene, F. very appropriately wished us "all the compliments of the season". We reached the top of Carn nan Gabhar about 4:20. The mist did not lift, and we had to forego even the view of Loch Loch, which can be seen from the slopes of this hill. We waited for about 20 minutes in the hope that the mist would rise, but we were doomed to disappointment; so we set out on our homeward journey, and made for Airgiod Bheinn. The sun now shone out, and we were able to take a few photographs as we walked along the ridge; while a backward glance gave us the mortification of seeing Carn nan Gabhar clear of mist and standing out boldly in the morning sunshine. In the valley to our right, on the other hand, a swirling sea of mist still rose and fell, on which, as on a lantern screen, we had the pleasure of seeing ourselves reflected for a few seconds like giants of the Brocken. Airgiod Bheinn was reached at 5:10, and we sat down to remove some of our Arctic trimmings. A little gathering of icicles hung from the points of our caps, while our stockings were covered with small nuggets of ice.

We had a fine view to the south from this summit, the Lomonds and other well-known hills being easily seen. But the prospect is inferior to that which is to be had from some of the other peaks. Accordingly we did not spend much time here, but commenced our last descent. We were not familiar with this side of the mountain, and, as the slope was steep and stony, we took a considerable time to reach the valley to the east. Along this valley runs the Rathad nam Ban Righ (The Queen's Road), recalling the visit of Queen Mary to this district in 1564. She was present at a "royal hunting" which took place at Loch Loch, and doubtless she travelled by this route on her way to and from the scene of the hunt. After tramping along this old road at a leisurely pace for about an hour, we struck our road of the previous night at a point several miles to the east of that at which we had left it to climb



Carn Liath. It was now 7:30, and we lay down by the roadside and slept peacefully in the warm sunshine—a pleasant experience after the never-ending snell winds of the night. We then strolled in very leisurely fashion back to Blair Atholl, which we reached just before mid-day, heartily agreeing that we had had what the Irish would call a “quare fine time”, and that we must have many another tramp over Beinn a' Ghlo.

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LOCH-AN-EILAN.

A SONNET.

THE mountain tops rise into spectral mist;  
The wind is moaning in the forest fir;  
The steel-blue waters scarcely are astir,  
That darkly mirror those gaunt hills, cloud-kissed,  
And gently lap that islet's mantling green,  
Where stand the castle ruins, old and gray,  
Silent and grim, that rang with old-time fray—  
The terror of a wild, long-dead Has-been!  
Foamless and dark the shadowed waters sleep;  
While on the mountain tops the wind shrieks shrill,  
And, rioting in passes scarred and steep,  
Strikes the black Larig with a death-like chill.  
But here the silent waters darkly keep  
Lost untold stories, safely hidden still.

J. D.

Kingussie, September 3, 1903.

—*The Scotsman*, September 12, 1903.