

STORM ON THE GARBH COIRE CRAGS.

BY C. G. CASH, F.R.S.G.S.

THE name Garbh Coire, signifying the Rough Corrie, is one of frequent occurrence in the Scottish Highlands. As is usually the case in early place-names, the word is descriptive, and is obviously applied for the purpose of topographical identification. There are, of course, many corries that are characterised by roughness, and hence the frequency of the name Garbh Coire. But among the Cairngorms *the* Garbh Coire is Garbh Coire Dhe, the one lying between Braeriach and Cairn Toul. This corrie is one of the most impressive features of this mountain group, and is, I believe, the mightiest corrie in Scotland. Its bounding mountains are the third and fourth highest in the country, Braeriach 4248 feet, and Cairn Toul 4240·5 feet; to the north-west of Cairn Toul the Angel's Peak or Sgor an Lochan Uaine, one of its subsidiary "tops", reaches an elevation of over 4000 feet, and right opposite the mouth of the corrie is the vast bulk of Ben Muich Dhui, 4296 feet. The edge of the surrounding crags is throughout most of its five miles extent at an elevation of about 4000 feet, falling below this only at the west of the Angel's Peak, where for a quarter of a mile it does not quite reach 3750 feet. The bottom of the hollow of the Garbh Coire lies between 2750 and 2000 feet, and most of the vertical distance from the upper edge to this lower level is accounted for in the nearly thousand feet of crags and screes that ring round this gigantic hollow.

The corrie measures, lengthwise, from south-west to north-east, two miles, and its greatest breadth, between the summits of Braeriach and Cairn Toul, is a mile and three-quarters. Surrounding the central hollow, the part below 3000 feet, the corrie has four well-marked subsidiary corries, which indeed constitute its grandest features. These are, in the north-east Coire Bhrochain, in the north-

west Fuar Gharbh-Choire, in the south-west An Garbh-Choire, and in the south-east Coire an Lochan Uaine. An Garbh-Choire may be considered as the upper part of the main hollow, for from the base of the crags and screes at its western extremity there is no notably sudden change of level all along it, and its general direction is in line with the length of the central corrie. Fuar Gharbh-Choire lies mainly above the 3250 feet contour, and drops somewhat suddenly from about that level to the main hollow. Coire Bhrochain lies at a slightly higher level, its lip being about 3300 feet, and the drop from it much deeper and steeper than from Fuar Gharbh-Choire. The Coire an Lochan Uaine is the most markedly enclosed, being a well-formed basin, with the lochan in its hollow at about the 3000 feet level.

These four subsidiary corries differ remarkably in their condition as to water. The Coire Bhrochain contains no water, except the small peaty pools so common throughout the corrie, and it sends out no effluent stream. An Garbh-

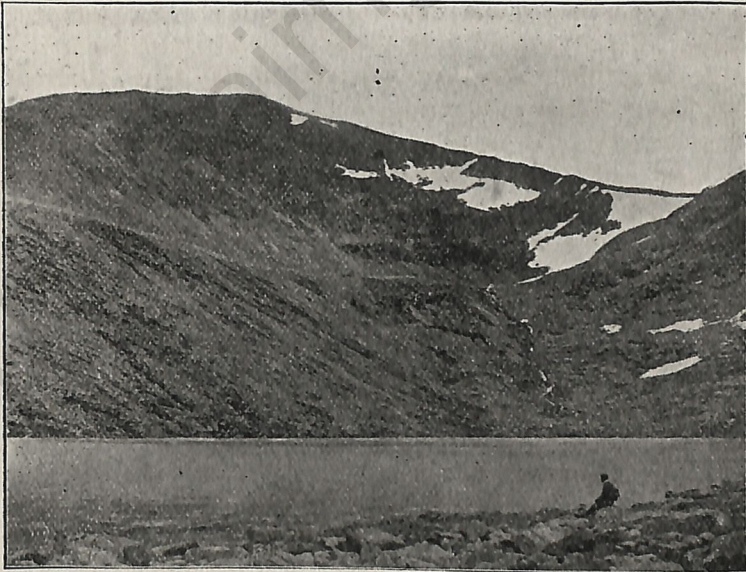


Photo by

LOCHAN UAINE OF CAIRN TOUL.

James Simpson.

Choire has numerous springs in the western part of its hollow, at the base of the crags and screes, and the stream they form follows the main line of the central hollow. The Coire an Lochan Uaine, as its name indicates, contains the Lochan Uaine, which is one of the specially fine features of the corrie, nestling darkly, in spite of its name, at the base of the great northern crag of Cairn Toul. Into this lochan there falls a small stream, fed by the springs of this crag; its effluent waters escape mostly underground, and form a strong burn that makes a noisy cascade down some 550 feet of the almost craggy declivity from the well-marked lip of the corrie to the main hollow, where, at the 2250 feet level, it joins the main stream. The Fuar Gharbh-Choire is the most interesting of the four in this connection, for over the north-western corner of its surrounding crags leaps the Allt a' Gharbh-Choire, the head stream of the Dee, but half-a-mile old. For some 700 feet this stream dashes down a scarcely climbable crag, making a fine cascade, whose musical roar fills the air throughout the corrie, and whose long white gleam forms a marked feature in the view of the corrie from Ben Muich Dhui, and can be seen even from Lochnagar. In two-thirds of a mile from the crag edge, flowing to the south-east, the stream meets that from An Garbh-Choire; it abruptly changes its direction eastward, and, after receiving the waters from Lochan Uaine and those from the Pools of Dee, swings southwards, and assumes by common consent the name Dee. There has been not a little controversy as to the most suitable naming of these upper waters, but I think those best acquainted with the streams and their surroundings are in agreement with old MacGillivray that the Allt a' Gharbh-Choire is the true head stream of the Dee.

I had paid several visits to the crags of the Garbh Coire, and hoped that during the summer holiday of 1903 I might supplement these by a leisurely walk all along their top edge. But the weather was so utterly unreliable that I did not for some time venture on such an expedition; the barometer seemed to be dancing a jig, as "depression" after "depression" came in close order from the Atlantic.

But just at the end of August there came a promise of better things; the barometer rose steadily for thirty-six hours, and I decided to take the offered chance. I rose before dawn, found the barometer still rising, breakfasted by lamplight, and sallied forth from Inverdruie. The early morning was very quiet and grey, and I thought it looked not unpromising. As I followed the southward road from Coylum Bridge, the sun peeped over the southern flank of Meall a' Bhuachaille, and threw into beautiful flecks of light and shade the irregularities of Craigellachie. The blackcock were apparently newly awakened from sleep, and I put up a number of them in the edge of the wood beyond Whitewell, where they are often to be seen. Beyond the cross roads I saw several deer, but they did not trouble to move far away, contenting themselves with standing at gaze at a distance of about 150 yards.

As I passed the lookout point in Glen Eunach and opened up the view of the Sgoran Dubh, I saw that the clouds were just touching their tops, and for the next few miles I watched with some interest the rising and falling of the curtain, hoping, but in vain, to see it finally rise and disappear. When, at 8 a.m., I entered Coire Dhondaill, the summit of Sgor Ghaoith had not once emerged, and I had to take what comfort I could out of several very good pieces of white heather, some pretty specimens of the Alpine Speedwell (*Veronica alpina*), and the soaring flight of a golden eagle across the upper part of the corrie.

Above Coire Dhondaill is a useful leading cairn of perhaps somewhat small size, and as I sat awhile at this to look around, I began to suspect that the day would not prove so fair as I wished, for all the sky was covered with heavy billows of cloud of a distinctly threatening lead-grey colour. From the cairn nothing can be seen of the great plateau of Braeriach and Cairn Toul, because the cairn, quite properly, is set just in the depression that leads to Coire Dhondaill; but there was a fine view across to the Sgoran Dubh, and to the uplands of Carn Ban, &c., to the south of it, and on this sky-line a few stags made a

pretty picture. Further to the south, beyond Lochan nan Cnapan, was the hollow that drains to the Eidart; near the loch was a small herd of deer, a score or so in number, which began moving southwards when they saw me.

I kept a little below the 3500 feet level, and walked eastwards along the sloping hillside, keeping just above the numerous stone-slides that make progress so difficult and slow. As I crossed the first slight ridge, and came



WHAT'S THAT ?

*Photo by**Major Grant.*

amongst the head waters of the Linneach, a tributary of the Eidart, I could see the beginning of Glen Geusachan, below Beinn Bhrotain, and at the next little ridge I brought Lochan Suarach into the foreground. Near the upper waters of the Geusachan were several groups of stags, and as I advanced they gradually clumped together, and then moved in a long file down the eastern side of

the stream. A long-drawn line of deer trotting thus, and halting occasionally to look back, makes an attractive and characteristic item in so truly Highland a scene. I now turned a little towards the upper part of the ridge, where the going is probably a little easier, and as I approached the south side of the Angel's Peak I saw that its top and that of Cairn Toul were in the clouds, and that Coire Bhrochain, which now came into view across the Garbh Coire, was filled with mist. When I came to the Garbh Coire edge above Coire an Lochan Uaine, I saw that the mist was down on all the tops and ridges that rose above about 3800 feet, and so formed a sort of canopy right across the Garbh Coire and Glen Dee.

On the very edge of the corrie, some little distance up the slope of Cairn Toul, is a well-built but roofless shelter, looking straight across the Lochan and into Coire Bhrochain. Here, about 10.30 a.m., I sat and lunched, and studied the curious effects of the driving mist. Billow after billow floated along in the wind, and the effect was somewhat that of looking under a waving tent-roof, which rose and fell, revealing and hiding in turn plateau, crags, tops, and glens. The topographical revelation was not the same for two minutes in succession, and the continual change in visible detail was of extreme interest, as attention was always on the stretch to recognise what came looming through hazily, or at times showed clearly at a distance through an unexpected gap, and my previous knowledge of the district was severely tested, and not a little increased. From my seat I could see the two largest Pools of Dee and the stream that flowed from them, but I could not see the Falls of Dee into the Fuar Gharbh-Choire, as the north-east buttress of the Angel's Peak just hid them.

I doubted much whether it was worth while to ascend Cairn Toul. On a previous occasion I had had quite enough of cold and mist on its summit. But, in order to carry out my programme, I went on, and was lucky in having the top clear for some twenty minutes. I visited both Cairns (4240·5 and 4227 feet), and did some small

scrambling in search of plants on the steep slopes overlooking Glen Dee. The persistent overhanging curtain of mist prevented any distant or large view, but perhaps made more noticeable the things that were revealed. Thus I noticed that, besides the Dee Falls, now in full view and resonant, I could plainly see the water on the flat just to the north of them, where the watershed between Dee and Spey is so difficult to determine. I saw very clearly part of the driving road in Glen Lui, just south of Derry Lodge; and, looking away to the north, made out the shape of Lochindorb, which showed just above the sky-line of Sron na Leirg. The summit of Braeriach was free from mist for a few minutes. In my descent I kept as close to the crag edge as possible, for my programme was to walk all round the Garbh Coire, and this was the beginning. I found another built shelter, some 150 feet higher up than my first one, but not nearly so well constructed.

As I approached the Angel's Peak, passing above the Coire an Lochan Uaine, I saw the top of Cairngorm clear for a short time, but while I was on the top of the Peak the mist canopy was resting on all the Garbh Coire crags. Quitting the west side of the Angel's Peak, and passing an old cairngorm mine, I noticed that where the crag edge falls below 3750 feet (its lowest marked point is 3713·5 feet), the slope into the Garbh Coire seemed less impossible of ascent or descent, and I was accordingly not surprised to find here a plainly-marked track by which deer make their way between the depths of the corrie and the heights of the plateau. I think this is the only place where deer could get up and down. The track head is just opposite the source of the eastern head waters of the Linneach.

It was now mid-day, and I became conscious that the wind was getting colder and heavier, but as it was blowing from the east of south, and so at my back, it caused me no inconvenience. The ground now rose to the inner, western, corner of An Garbh-Choire, and I paused some time to gaze down the great gullies among the black-green rifted rocks. Turning to look in the opposite direction under

the heavy mist curtain, my eye was caught by the view, at some seven miles' distance, of the upper portion of the Feshie, the part that, according to the physiographers, has been "captured" from the Geldie.

Having rounded the inner corner of these gullies, I followed the crag edge some little distance, getting the wind in my face, and then, planting my walking-stick as a marker, I turned away from the crag to visit the March Cairn (4148·8 feet). The air was too misty to make any view possible from it, for the clouds were just touching the plateau, but I had previously noted that, standing at it, one can see the four summit cairns of Ben Muich Dhui, Braeriach, Cairn Toul, and Cairngorm. Returning to my walking stick, which looked very small and slight at a distance of some 500 yards, I resumed my crag walk, now across the wind, which was getting still colder and stronger. About 1 p.m. I was approaching the projecting horn that divides An Garbh-Choire from Fuar Gharbh Choire, and here I was surprised to come on two sheep. They also seemed surprised, but did not move far away, nor show much alarm. Sheep occasionally get wandered among the hills—I have previously found them on the Sgoran Dubh—and lead a half-wild existence, as do also goats in larger numbers on the plateau of Ben Muich Dhui and Cairngorm.

With the wind blowing in my face, I found some difficulty in looking down into the corrie, as the air, of course, came rushing up from it and lashed my beard against my face. Two tiny snowflakes of most beautiful and perfect construction fell on my sleeve, and gave me both a pleasurable moment in examining their delicate pattern, and some anxiety as to what they foretold. I soon saw that rain and snow were falling on the south side of the corrie, and then could see large rain-drops rushing horizontally through the space, and swiftly rising as they reached the near crag edge, and my face received many stinging blows from the flying pellets of snow. Rounding the projecting horn, I turned somewhat away from the blast, and proceeded about a quarter of a mile further along the crag,

looking down now into the Fuar Gharbh-Choire, which to my mind then fully deserved its title of Cold Rough Corrie. Building a tall stone-man as a marker, I struck off across the plateau to visit the Wells of Dee, a place to which I have made several pilgrimages, but not previously one in such wild weather. For it now became evident that I was in for a bad storm. The wind was roaring, rain and snow were falling freely, or rather being driven almost horizontally along, the mist was thickening, and all the air was darkened. I could not see enough to get a good line for the Wells, and struck the stream quite 100 yards too low down—in fact, below the place where it disappears in the gravel. I followed it up, and sat awhile for a small lunch and rest by the uppermost well. It was cold and cheerless, and I was not sorry to be on the move again, battling with the wind in the return to my stone man. Though it was snowing and raining, I did not venture to put on my cape, for I feared it would act as a balloon, and I needed all my steadiness of foot to walk the crag top in such a wind. By the time I reached the Dee Falls, I found it quite difficult to walk on the rough ground, the gusts of wind were so violent. Cairn Toul and the Angel's Peak were quite hidden in the storm-cloud, though, curiously, Ben Muich Dhui showed clear for a few moments. The head of the Dee Falls was unapproachable, for the wind flung the water far and high in drenching and blinding sheets and masses.

I now debated with myself what was best to do. The storm was rapidly increasing in violence; the wind was bitterly cold, and the hard blown snow smote the face with the sting of small shot. It was quite impossible to look into the wind, even had there been any view; but view there was none, except of the rushing grey mist, through which lay the remainder of my intended crag walk. I was tempted to turn tail, and make my way off the plateau by its north-west corner. But I had with me a pair of heavy gardening gloves, which quite protected my hands, and I had put on a broad-brimmed hat so as to get shade from the hoped-for sunshine. So, thinking that the experience

of walking the Braeriach ridge in such a storm would be worth having, I pulled the hat brim hard down so as to cover completely the right-hand side of my face, and, holding it there with my right hand, started again. I had, however, scarcely realised the fury that the storm would reach on the now rising ground. My walking-stick was diverted from the spot where I intended to plant its point, and, as I lifted a foot in my stride, I felt the leg distinctly pushed aside by the hurricane. In some of the rougher places, where balance was necessary to make walking possible, I could not walk erect, but was compelled to go down on all fours! At 1:30 p.m. I came to the edge of the Coire Bhrochain, turned north again, and moving now with the wind, was rushed up on to the top plateau of Braeriach, the wind roaring and hissing up the great gullies in the corner with a most impressive volume of sound. Here I crouched for a few moments' breathing space before venturing to attempt the summit cairn. I had been along the narrow Braeriach ridge several times, and had no doubt that I should succeed in getting along it in safety, but with such a dense cloud, such a storm of snow and rain, and such a tremendous wind, it needed all the strength and care that I could give it. At the cairn I squatted for a few seconds, but it was quite impossible to do more than take a hasty peep at my watch and note that it was 2:5 p.m. Then I fought my way along that narrow ridge, seeing nothing on either side, so dense was the cloud, and trying to do nothing but keep right ahead. The thing was a nightmare of wild turmoil, and I have no recollection of anything along there but the dogged, strenuous effort to keep my line and not be blown over or buffeted out of it by the fierce blasts that leaped roaring from the many gullies. When I thought I had gone far enough, for I could see nothing to guide me, I began working cautiously to my left, and soon found that I was all right, and descended through the lower portion of the cloud into the head of Coire Bennie. As soon as I got some little shelter from the wind, I put on my cape, for I was getting very wet. Then I rested for a few moments at the source of the Little Bennie.

But rain was now falling in torrents, and I thought it best to push on. I halted only once, to gather some plants that I had noted in the corrie on a previous visit. As I got lower in the more open part of the glen of the Little Bennie, the wind and rain increased if possible, and, being now somewhat tired, I was several times forcibly shoved aside from the little track I was following, so sudden and violent were the gusts. However, the day's work was drawing to a close; I was wet through, safely off the hill, and on the way home; I had had my "ploy", and nothing remained but a steady tramp in, luckily on a fair road and with the wind at my back. The wind and rain continued with unabated violence all the evening, and when I got in I found some explanation in the fact that the barometer had fallen six-tenths of an inch within twelve hours.