

THREE VISITS TO THE GARBH COIRE.

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

“THREE VISITS” I have written, but, as will be seen, one of them did not “come off.” But its story may be told here nevertheless. Of the Garbh Coire and of its wild attractions not a little has already been written in this journal and elsewhere. Certainly I know of no bit of Scottish wilderness at once so sternly wild and so strongly attractive. This attractiveness of the upland wilderness seems to me to make appeal to each of the main elements of the human constitution—to the body, to the mind, and to the spirit. There is physical joy in the muscular exertion of the walk and the climb, and in the consciousness of victory over distance and material obstacles; there is a constant demand for accuracy of poise and movement, and a continual and rapid change in eye focus; the breathing of the pure and rarer air is deep, the heart beats strongly; all bodily functions are vigorous, and make for health and development. The mind, *mens sana in corpore sano*, is all alert, and finds its interests in recognising the relation of topographical details, and the geological phenomena of tor, cliff, scree, ravine, moraine-heap; in noting the distribution and limitation of plants, and their modification in adaptation to their environment; in observation of the special and somewhat less abundant forms of animal life, their protective colouring, and their behaviour in security and in alarm. The spirit is greatly moved and delighted. The impressiveness of wide space, the massiveness of crag and cliff, the brightness of sun-lit colour, the solemnity of gloom, the exquisiteness of the dainty mountain flowers gleaming in their wet rocky nooks, the soaring flight of the eagle, the agile beauty of the running deer; over all the vast embracing silence, punctuated rather than broken by the rush of distant water, the babble of the neighbouring burn, or the sighing of the wind through the dry

grass; or at times the mighty roar of storm winds, and the wild welter of rain and snow;—all these are potent to lift the spirit out of the duller commonplaces of life, and to impart an exaltation that clarifies and strengthens; and nowhere are these meted out in fuller abundance than in such wildernesses as the Garbh Coire and its surrounding crags and plateaus. "Solitude is charming", said the witty Frenchman, "but it needs someone to whom one can say, 'Solitude is charming'". Solitude *a deux* undoubtedly has its delights, though they are scarcely those of the mountain wilderness. And though congenial companionship will certainly add some charms to an excursion, yet the sheer impressiveness of the wilderness is most felt when one strays alone, scarce conscious of one's own physical presence, and entirely open to the appeal of great nature. This is as the matter seems to me, and it is for these joys that I turn more and more often to that great plateau of Braeriach and Cairn Toul, and to the huge Garbh Coire embraced in its curves.

But to my story. The rocky walls of the Garbh Coire are the home of Alpine plants. Their granite weathers into a less fertile soil than the mica schist of the more southern mountains of Breadalbane and Clova, but still they yield many of our Alpines, and these constitute certainly one of the most interesting of the natural groups of our flora. A botanical friend from the south wished to spend a day gathering these treasures, and I was to act as guide and manager of the expedition. Accordingly one morning at the beginning of August last he arrived at Aviemore soon after 4 a.m., and after some breakfast we drove to the bothy at the head of Glen Eunach. On the way we had the unusual sight of a fine badger running across the road and into the ferns near Loch an Eilein Gate, and as we passed the loch we saw a heron flying. We reached the bothy at 7.30, and having arranged for the trap to return for us at 6 p.m. we started up Coire Dhondail. Before we got more than halfway up, the weather showed unkindness; mist came down, the wind began to blow more strongly, and fine rain fell, increasing

rapidly in heaviness. On the rocks at the head of the corrie we got a few Alpines, notably some pretty *Veronica alpina*. When we emerged from the corrie and halted awhile at the leading cairn at 9 a.m., the weather conditions were severe and disagreeable; rain was falling heavily, the mist was very dense, and the wind was cold. I made the most direct line I could under such circumstances for the edge of the corrie of Lochan Uaine, in which I intended that most of our time should be spent. But the badness of the weather increased so much that at 10 o'clock, when I thought we ought to have reached the lip of the corrie, it was quite impossible to judge with any accuracy where we had got to; and my companion—not a bad-weather hillsman—was pleading for retreat. For shelter and a few minutes' rest we descended into a wide gully containing a large wreath of snow. I could see only a few yards down the gully, but I judged from that little that we were on the lip of the Lochan Corrie, and so we were, as I ascertained on a later visit. It was, however, quite out of the question to take the risk of scrambling down into the unknown under such conditions, and also botanising would be impracticable, so I reluctantly consented to return. My companion was now anxious to know how I was going to find my way back, for nothing was visible around except a closely encircling pall of dense driving mist and rain. It was impossible to exhibit a map, and so I tried to explain to him the mental model of the plateau surface that I was following, and in less than half an hour I showed him marks that I had made on a gravel patch during our outward walk. Those familiar with the ground will recognise that it is not altogether a simple matter to hit the top of Coire Dhondail in such weather, and that the great probability is that of bearing too far southwards, yielding, that is, to the slope of the hill. I was guarding against this tendency, and, as a matter of fact, I bore about a hundred yards too far to my right, and was checked by coming to the unnamed stream that flows south-westwards into the Coire Dhondail. Thus ended this "visit" to the Garbh Coire, if it may so be called.

We descended to the rocks at the top of the corrie, and spent some more time looking for Alpines. And now occurred one of those rapid changes that mountain weather is liable to. Quite suddenly, about 11 o'clock, the sky cleared, the sun shone out warmly, and the wind moderated. We were certainly very wet, but we began to dry, and I proposed that we should make a round of the head of Glen Eunach, and see what we could get there. We made our way up to the plateau again, and followed the edge of the corrie towards the stream that flows from Lochan nan Cnapan. I scrambled down over very broken and treacherous rocks and scree to Am Bodach, the Old Man, of Coire Odhar, a notable spire of rock that can be well seen from Ross's Path, and that stands over against A' Cailleach, the Old Woman, of Sgor Gaoith. We searched many of the wet gullies and rocks of the head of Glen Eunach, and got certainly many Alpines, but not the three or four that we most desired. *Veronica alpina*, *Potentilla Sibbaldii*, *Sedum Rhodiola*, *Silene acaulis*, *Rubus chamaemorus*, *Epilobium alpinum*, *Salix herbacea*, *Salix Myrsinites*, and *Alchemilla alpina* were among the things noted. In the afternoon we dropped down into Coire Odhar, getting white and deep red heather, and followed Ross's Path to the outlet of the loch. We saw some few deer, perhaps not more than a score, and also three sheep high up in the corrie. Sheep are often to be seen there, and perhaps wander up from Glen Feshie. The trap met us near the lower bothy, and we had the pleasure of a drive down the glen and through the forest in the fine summer evening. Early the next morning my friend returned to town; and thus ends the first part of my story.

My second visit to the Garbh Coire last year was late in August. I left Inverdrue about 5.30 on a dull, quiet morning, with the sky prettily dappled with "mackerel" clouds, and the barometer falling. By 6.30 I was at the beginning of the Lairig track, and then had a very pleasant walk on that roughest of roads. The weather improved as the day got older, the sun was bright and fairly warm, and the early chilliness of the wind lessened.

Having walked the Larig many times, and become somewhat familiar with it, I was interested in some of its details, and specially in the crags of the Sron na Leirg, and in a rather attractive-looking green corrie due east from the Sron Cairn. On these crags it is probable that eagles sometimes nest, as they are occasionally seen flying in that neighbourhood. I had seen three flying near there only a few days before, and one of them was a young bird. About 9.30 a.m., when I had passed the Pools of Dee, I bore off to the westward, keeping about the level of the 2750 feet contour line, and so entering the Garbh Coire on its north side. The going here was very troublesome, because the steepish brae was all irregular with great blocks of fallen granite, and the gaps and holes were often hidden by a tangle of heather. There seems nothing gained by keeping so high up, for the roughness of the surface confines one's attention, and prevents free enjoyment of the grand surrounding scenery, and certainly the heather and scree give less pleasant company than the babbling burn in the hollow. Towards 11 a.m. I reached the opening of the Fuar Garbh Coire, the north-western section of the corrie, striking the Dee at about 3200 feet, just where it is leaving this huge recess and dropping to the lower level of the main hollow. Here I was at the upper limit of the heather and also off the screes; so walking became vastly easier, and, indeed, very pleasant. The stream varied much between brawling rapids and quiet shallows, and the ground near it was in many stretches richly coated with herbage, giving smooth going, and offering good feeding for deer, of which, however, to my disappointment, I saw none. Among the big rocks that lay about I found many ferns, and notably the Parsley fern, *Allosorus crispus*, which seems not commonly distributed in this district. The previous year I had noted [C.C.J., IV., 200] that a deer track ascended from the south-western section of the Garbh Coire to the plateau by a gully a little to the west of the Angel's Peak, Sgor an Lochan Uaine. This route I intended to use as a way up out of the corrie, and accordingly I was studying the

face of the crags in that neighbourhood to see whether the gully looked practicable from below. I readily identified it, and, as far as I could judge at the distance, it looked as though it could be ascended without much difficulty. Its lowest section was all very rough scree, but the upper part looked reasonably easy. But when I had gone far enough northwards to get a clear view of the walls of the Fuar Garbh Coire, I saw that there was yet another route, and obviously an easier one, about a quarter of a mile east of the Dee Falls, and therefore much more convenient for me upon this expedition. Here, above a moderate scree, was a wide stretch of the steep corrie side covered with green growth, and diversified by jutting ribs and masses of rock, above which a red scree of moderate extent led to the plateau level. This was so clearly my easy and near way up that I relinquished all thought of crossing the whole width of the corrie to the Angel's Peak gully. I had now the Dee Falls full in front, and, as I got nearer, their splash and roar filled the air with a cheery sound, and the picture of the stream leaping over the sky-line and falling in broken cascades adown the crag was most attractive. I have seen no representation of this that does it anything like justice. As I approached the base of the fall the ground got steeper, and presently I was scrambling rather than merely walking. The wet rocky sides of the stream yielded a good harvest of Alpines and Sub-Alpines, and my vasculum soon began to fill. Scanning the crag more narrowly at close quarters, I saw that by following the east bank of the stream for less than a quarter of the height of the fall I could gain access to a sort of gallery or terrace in the crag that slanted away upwards and eastwards, and then seemed to turn in again towards the stream, and come out at the head of the fall. It was not possible from below to work out all this route with detailed certainty, but I was quite satisfied that it was worth attempting, and so I gave up my intention of using the broad green ascent that I had noted further east. But, as it turned out, I was not, on this day, to use even this third projected route. For when I actually got to the base of

the fall, where climbing with hands as well as feet became necessary, I happened to be on the west side of the stream, with a little above me some ground that looked as though it bore a good crop of Alpines. My first attempt to climb up to it was a failure. I should, perhaps, say that I am not a "climber", for I have never been "roped", and am not at all an expert on rocks. But still I did want to reach this bit of the crag, and, putting my best efforts into the task, I surmounted the intervening rock-face, and reached my reward. I got a goodly number of plants, especially some large and beautiful specimens of *Veronica alpina*. Now came Nemesis. After a little scrambling to and fro, I turned to make my descent over the rocks I had just ascended, so that I might pass to the other side of the stream and try my gallery. But here came in a common-place difficulty of climbing: what I had ascended with much difficulty I could not descend at all. I had to take serious counsel with myself, and I decided that, as descent was plainly impossible, further ascent would have to be attempted, though I had no idea at all how I was to succeed in reaching the crag top. As I had looked up at this part of the crag from below, its ascent seemed utterly impracticable, but the conditions that had developed made the attempt imperative. Of course I had been reading, as I suppose all of us had, of the numerous—far too numerous—fatal accidents that had occurred during the summer in the Alps through people getting into dangerous places, and I had joined in the usual condemnation of such folly. Yet here, very innocently, I had placed myself in just such a dangerous position. For real danger there undoubtedly was. The whole crag was dripping wet, and so the rocks were slippery and treacherous; the jutting stones that I had to grip or stand on might be sufficiently loose to give way under my weight, and each one had to be strongly tested before I could trust to it. The position was certainly one to try the nerves, and, though I recognised the seriousness of the case, and the practical certainty of a disastrous fall in case of any slip, I was well satisfied to find that I had no feeling of fear,

but only a strong sense of the absolute need of the utmost steadiness and caution, and a tenseness of nerve that precluded all carelessness. Nevertheless, now and again I paused to gather fresh plants, and was specially delighted with a group of beautifully flowering *Saussurea alpina*. By 12.15 I was well pleased to emerge from this crag on to the plateau, and to feel that I had escaped from a decidedly uncomfortable position. After a short rest by the head of the falls, I went direct to the summit of Braeriach. From the summit cairn I looked up Speyside, and saw that all the upper part of the valley was hidden in rain clouds, and that these were travelling towards me. Moving then down the brae westwards, I lay down by the first spring I came to, and had some lunch. Then, repassing the head of the Dee Falls, I followed the edge of the corrie to the top of the great horn that separates Fuar Garbh Coire from An Garbh Coire. On the very top of one of the rocky ribs of this horn there is a small grass-covered seat, from which is to be obtained one of the most striking views of the whole corrie. The little seat has to be approached with extreme caution, but whenever I get near it in fair weather I like to creep down to it and enjoy the wide and deep outlook. As viewed from this point, my recent climb looked utterly impossible, and I was tempted to think that I must have dreamed it. Turning from the corrie edge I went next to the neighbouring March Cairn (4149 feet). As I approached it I became conscious of a decided increase in the strength of the wind and a lowering of its temperature, and began to fear that the rain-storm I had seen in the distance would yet reach the Cairngorms. From the March Cairn I strolled down over the easy gravel of the plateau to the Fuaran Dhe, the true Wells of Dee, and then went across to the Eunach Cairn (4061 feet), which I reached a few minutes after 2 p.m. The clouds had by this time covered the summit of Cairn Toul, and as I walked northwards along the ridge overlooking Glen Eunach I saw the cloud cover the March Cairn, and a few flying rain spots reached me. At the north-west corner of the plateau I began to

descend towards Glen Eunach, near the stream a little south of the upper zig-zag path, came upon a herd of some sixty deer feeding on the grassy terrace that is one of their favourite resorts hereabouts, and then finished the descent by the lower zig-zag and the long flattened shoulder towards the lower Little Bennie, getting a few very fair pieces of white heather. When at 4 p.m. I halted awhile at Quain's Well the rain cloud was dark on the Sgoran Dubh, and a little later on Braeriach also; but it was fair, though very dull, below. As I passed near White-well I could see that heavy rain was falling at Carr Bridge, and then over the ridge of the Monadh Liadh. I reached Inverdrurie just before 6 p.m., and within half an hour rain began there, and there was a heavy downpour all the rest of the evening.

My third visit to the Garbh Coire last year was at the end of August. I started at 5 on a cool, quiet, misty morning, with the old moon high in the southern heavens, and all the hills clean cut silhouettes against a perfectly clear sky. At the Bennie Bridge I got my first touch of sunlight from the recently risen sun, but after I entered the Larig track at 6 I walked up into the shadow of the mountains along its eastern side, and did not again get direct sunshine till at 8.35 I reached the lowest Pool of Dee. This walking in the shadow had the advantage of coolness. Soon after I got fairly up into the Pass, and cleared the trees, I became conscious of a peculiar condition of the atmosphere. All the air was visibly thick and murky; there was nothing like a cloud or mist, but an appearance as though all the air was full of fine, dull grey smoke; and there was at the same time a heavy odorous sensation not amounting to a positive smell, but rather a dull, vague suggestion as of incense. I was at first reminded of the condition of the air in the spring, when the heather is being burned, but the smell was not that of burning heather; it had no pungency, but merely a dull murkiness of flavour just comparable to the air's dull murkiness of appearance. I do not remember to have experienced just such olfactory sense impressions before, and they were

certainly curious. The southward aspect of the Larig could hardly be called inviting, and, indeed, I began to fear that a storm was brewing. As a matter of fact, this eventually proved to be the case, but I did not suffer from it. I noticed two new points in the Larig: one was the abundance of water ousels, one especially showing itself very freely near the Lochan nan Uilleam Ghow, and the other was a considerable cairn of large stones near the south-west corner of the lowest but one of the Pools of Dee. I seem not to have noted this cairn before, and it would be interesting to know whether it has some special history.* At the lowest Pool I rested awhile, and then I followed the stream down to the junction of the Allt Mor, which is just about the 2250 feet contour. I paused a while to look up into the deep, green corrie of this stream, which rises on the plateau of Ben Muich Dhui, perhaps at a loftier elevation than any other stream in the country. Then I bore off westwards, keeping just above the contour line, and so striking the Dee, that is the Allt a' Gharbh Coire, just above the junction of the stream that comes tumbling down from the Lochan Uaine of Cairn Toul. In this traverse I found multitudes of springs and rivulets of water. Hereabouts I was conscious that the murkiness of the air was much increased, though the sun heat was great. Looking towards Ben Muich Dhui I could see at times no detail at all, but only the huge dark mass of the mountain. I followed the stream upwards, keeping as near as the uneven ground would permit, in many places finding well-marked tracks of the deer through the rich herbage. At the 2750 feet level I was at the junction of the stream from An Garbh Coire with that from Fuar Garbh Coire; immediately below the junction the stream has cut out a very decided little gully or ravine. It was now 10.15 a.m., and I was really not sorry to see that clouds were gathering in the sky, for they afforded me some shelter from the intense and increasing sun-glare. The air between me and Ben Muich Dhui was plainly

* Has it? (Ed.)

getting murkier, also I was increasing the distance, and at times the mountain was barely visible; the effect was strange, almost uncanny. When I turned northwards and entered the Fuar Garbh Coire I saw that I had started some deer, and I sat awhile to watch them run. There were two stags, two hinds, and two calves, and they ran directly towards my green-clothed possible route up to the plateau to the east of the Dee Falls. This was a confirmation of my opinion, and it was with much interest that I saw them working their way up the steep. When they got about halfway up they seemed to disregard my distant presence, and began to feed. So I pushed on by the riverside till I was again at the base of the Dee Falls, but this time on the east side. The great heat in which I had been walking now for some two hours made the pleasant leap and splash of the water irresistible, and in a few minutes I found a convenient standing place below one of the great spouts of water, stripped, and took a delicious standing bath. The thundering crash of the water on my head and its chill buffeting on my body acted as a bracing tonic, and I soon felt ready "to go anywhere and do anything". But my experience on my previous visit had not been wasted, and I was quite resolved not to attempt to go up to any place from which I was not quite sure of being able to get down again. Under protection of this piece of discretion, I made my way to the lower end of my gallery or terrace, and was pleased to find that it proved a rather easy way up the crag, so that within half an hour from the termination of my bath I was at the head of the Falls. I am, however, not sure that it would be quite easy to hit this route from above. I next went along the crag-top eastwards to look at the upper end of the green deer route. This I at once saw was a quite practicable route either up or down, and I set up a stone man as a guide, though this is perhaps scarcely necessary, for the way is pretty obvious to anyone looking for such a route. Crossing the plateau in a northerly direction, I lunched at the same spring as before, and then spent some time getting pads of *Silene acaulis* and *Salix*

herbacea for a botanical rock-garden. I was amazed at the length of the underground parts of these plants. Of course it is obvious that plants exposed to the furious storm blasts that at times sweep across these high plateaus must both crouch low for shelter and grip hard for security. But when I had several times dug down more than a foot into the granite gravel, and still failed to get below the roots of these plants, I realised more than I had done before the severity of the conditions of their growth and the wonderful provision the plants make for meeting them. My practice in getting plants for cultivation is to cut out of the ground a ball of earth enclosing all the roots, and to wrap this up in several thicknesses of newspaper, wrapping at the same time part of the paper loosely round the aerial part of the plant. Thus treated, plants may be carried and kept for several days without material damage, and will have a good chance of continuing their growth when set in the garden. Passing over the summit of Braeriach I found the higher air very much clearer, and was able with the glass to watch the movements of three men at the cairn of Ben Muich Dhui. I soon gathered that they had no good map, and did not know the mountain well, for they descended the western face to the top of impossible rocks, and I could see that they conferred as to what they should do, and then moved in the least profitable direction to get down. It is curious and interesting to sit afar off and criticise the actions of some fellow-mountaineer in this way. I wonder who was watching me! About 2 p.m. I left the main mass of Braeriach, and made for the Sron na Leirg, going first to look down the zig-zag path and its Coire Ruadh into the Larig. Following the Sron northwards I kept as near its Larig side as I could, so as to visit the Eagle's Rocks and the corrie near them. The walking for much of this distance was very delightful. The ground was thickly carpeted with a soft turf, stones were very few, and deer tracks well marked. When I got north of the 3860 feet cairn, which I did not visit, I had to descend those extremely rough-stepped terraces by which the Sron drops to the lower level

of the Coire Odhar an Lochain Dhuibh. Beyond here I explored several of the stream hollows leading down to the Larig Burn, and in one of them I found an amazingly abundant stretch of white heather, unfortunately much past its best. Had I been to this a fortnight earlier I think I could have carried off an armful of fine sprays. Finally, I descended to the side of the Larig Burn, and followed it to Aultdrue, and before 7 p.m. was back at Inverdrue well satisfied with my day's tramp. Late at night rain began, and early next morning we had lightning and thunder, followed by hours of heavy rain. This was, I take it, the storm of which the previous day had shown the anticipatory gloom.

TO THE ROAD.

Cool is the wind, for the summer is waning,

Who's for the road?

Sun-flecked and soft, where the dead leaves are raining,

Who's for the road?

Knapsack and alpenstock press hand and shoulder,

Prick of the brier and roll of the boulder;

This be your lot till the season grow older;

Who's for the road?

Up and away in the hush of the morning,

Who's for the road?

Vagabond he, all conventions a-scorning,

Who's for the road?

Music of warblers so merrily singing,

Draughts from the rill from the roadside up-springing,

Nectar of grapes from the vines lowly swinging,

These on the road.

Now every house is a hut or a hovel,

Come to the road:

Mankind and moles in the dark love to grovel,

But to the road.

Throw off the loads that are bending you double;

Love is for life, only labour is trouble;

Truce to the town, whose best gift is a bubble:

Come to the road!

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR.

(From "Lyrics of Love and Laughter").