

BRAERIACH IN SEPTEMBER.

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ARRIVING at Aviemore on 31st August, we found the outlook anything but promising, a heavy rain and bitter north-west wind shutting out all the hills completely, but as the glass had just commenced to rise, we had hopes that the morrow might turn out at least a possible day for our expedition. Next day we were early astir, and on going to the door of the hotel could scarcely believe our eyes. The Cairngorms were, it is true, free of mist, except for the highest tops, but we looked upon a scene resembling mid December, rather than the first day of September! From the 2500 feet line upwards, every hill was thickly covered with snow—not a slight covering, but a dense continuous coat—the dark tracks of the burns down the hillsides being very conspicuous against the surrounding whiteness. We noted that, even on the lowest ground, the heather was scarcely in full bloom, while above 1500 feet it presented a sorry spectacle indeed. For long stretches scarce a single sprig of blossom was seen, and what buds there were did not, in the writer's estimation, seem as though they would come into bloom this season, as the buds were very small and quite six weeks later than would have been the case in an ordinary summer. During our walk up the Larig, the mist was almost continuously on the summit of Braeriach, but as the sky was clear to the north-west, from which direction the wind was blowing, we had hopes of a fine day, and these hopes were more than justified. Soon we reached the snow—first in tiny patches, but as we gained the higher grounds we were walking in an average depth of quite two inches, with drifts in the sheltered parts of more than eighteen inches. Sron na Leirg drops precipitously down to the Larig; it really is distinct from Braeriach, as when after a stiff

climb we reached the plateau, and expected to find Braeriach quite near to us, we found that a considerable col had to be crossed ere Braeriach proper was gained. The air at this height was piercingly keen, and reminded one of a mid-winter's day, the more so as every blade of grass was covered on the windward side with nearly an inch of stiff frozen snow, and fog crystals were on almost every boulder. A lordly golden eagle came soaring over the Larig from Ben Muich Dhui, and was closely followed by its mate, who flew low over the plateau, evidently on the keen look-out for ptarmigan. The golden eagles seem to pair for life, and keep together both summer and winter. Looking down to the Larig beneath us, the snow was seen lying even around the Pools of Dee, but at that low level (2,700 feet) was melting fast. We noted the tracks of a fox on the frost-bound surface of the snow, and also the foot-marks of a deer, evidently made the day before, when the animal was seeking more sheltered quarters on account of the storm. At length the plateau of Braeriach proper was reached, and here, strange to say, there was scarce a breath of wind, though mist and snow could be seen swirling down the Garbh-coire. As we reached the summit cairn, a slight shower of dry snow came on, accompanied by a thin mist through which the sun-bathed valley of the Spey could be dimly seen. Cairngorm was free of mist, and the sun lit up its snow-clad slopes with wonderful effect, the beauty being enhanced because of the fact that we were looking at it through the mist. Cairn Toul and Sgor an Lochan Uaine stood out across the valley of the Garbh-coire, and the mist and snow swirling down from Cairn Toul looked magnificent in the extreme. Lochan Uaine's surface was rippled by the wind, which, although blowing from the west, struck the shoulder of Cairn Toul, and blew hard across the loch from an easterly direction. The cairn of Braeriach was plastered with snow and ice, and a snow cornice quite ten feet deep—evidently formed the night before—overhung the precipice, which is only a few yards from the cairn. A view of extraordinary grandeur was obtained in every direction, but especially to the westward, where hill upon hill stood out clearly; in fact there was

scarce a hill on the whole horizon that was obscured by mist, which was very extraordinary seeing that a short time previously mist had lain on all the surrounding hills. To the northwards a splendid view was obtained of the Moray Firth, on whose surface sun and shade alternated, and Morven stood out very prominently behind it. The valley of the Spey was bathed in sunshine, and Aviemore and Grantown were easily made out, while Lochindorb to the north-east of the latter village stood out very prominently. Loch Phitiulais was another loch to be seen on Speyside, while, to the north of east, Ben Rinnes and the Buck of the Cabrach were very clear. Due east the giant bulk of Ben Muich Dhui shut off the view, but Beinn a' Bhuid and Ben Avon could be seen just beyond, sprinkled with snow, and further to the south Lochnagar stood out. To the north, the Ross-shire hills were rather hazy, although earlier in the day they had been very clear, while west-north-west the Coolins in Skye were prominent by reason of their sharp peaks. It is very rare for these hills to be seen from Braeriach, as they are no less than 100 miles distant. Ben Nevis was also clearly visible, with mist at times on the summit, and Ben Cruachan, Ben More with its sharp conical peak, and Ben Lawers were other hills to be seen to the westwards. While at the cairn the ptarmigan—no doubt astonished at the arctic character of the weather—were croaking around us, and the tracks of a mountain hare were also visible. A pair of snow buntings came overhead, disturbed by our arrival, and seemed loth to leave the spot, so that possibly they had been nesting late on account of the very unfavourable summer, and had had their nest destroyed by the storm. The writer this summer had several unsuccessful hunts for their nest, but although without doubt a few birds breed on the Cairngorms, the weather we have had has been all against successful hatching, as snow has been falling on the higher hills throughout the whole summer. From Braeriach's summit we made for the Dee, where the infant river falls down the precipice an almost sheer 600 feet. The corrie here has been named the Fuar Garbh-coire, which means the "cold rough corrie,"

but in the writer's opinion, the Garbh-coire proper, which rises at the western end of Braeriach, where is the seat of eternal snows, should have the prefix "Fuar" in preference to the one which at present has this title, and which faces due south. Three weeks previously a bridge of winter's snow still crossed the Dee at the top of the precipice, but now has broken up, although its sides are still left. From here we followed up the Dee to the Wells—about a mile distant. There the Dee suddenly appears from a hollow a few feet deep, but nothing could be seen of the Wells, as the fresh snow completely hid them. Hereabouts the storm had been more severe than at any other point, and at places the Dee was actually running under a freshly formed snow bridge, while thick ice covered the pools. The average depth of snow here was not far short of six inches, and we could not help feeling sorry for the unlucky grass which was struggling for an existence on the banks of the Dee. A few minutes' walk brought us to where we obtained an excellent view of Loch Eunach. As we were crossing the plateau, a wailing cry was heard, and looking up we saw a solitary golden plover, coming at express speed from the bog to the west of Braeriach, and making apparently for the east. It is a rather rare occurrence to see the golden plover at these heights so late in the season, as usually by this date they have left the nesting grounds for the sea. Very few ptarmigan indeed were met with, only three or four during the whole day, as in the severe weather they seek the lower part of the hills.

From the plateau it is a very steep descent into the Larig, and great care had to be exercised, as a good deal of the winter's snow still lay in patches on the slopes and offered a very treacherous footing. At length, however, the path was regained, and none too soon, as the wind had backed round to the south-west, and the whole sky was looking ominously grey. Soon a very heavy shower of snow enveloped the hills, but in the pass we had practically none. The day was now drawing in, and as we had a long tramp before us, we pushed on as quickly as possible, and reached civilization once more as the evening was setting in.