

## OVER THE HILLS TO TORRIDON.

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“Oh, marvellous glen of Torridon,  
With thy flanks of granite wall,  
And noon-silence more than midnight grim  
To overawe and appal!

Many a year I have wandered  
A thousand corries and glens,  
But never a one so awesome as thou,  
'Mid thy grimness and terror of bens.”

—*Principal Shairp.*

TORRIDON is a name of power, to lovers of poetry and to lovers of mountains alike. Principal Shairp, who might have been called the Highland Robert Burns, a name he in his modesty bestowed on a more obscure singer, celebrated the glen and its incomparable mountains with as much ardour as that which inspired his praise of Knoydart and Lochaber. But a far more exalted poet, Swinburne himself, has made the name of Torridon glorious in imperishable verse. On the way across “the vague miles of moorland road,” to a spot so full of inspiration, the sensuous rhythm of his great impetuous canticle kept humming in one's ears, that sublime evocation of the splendours and the ineffable solemnities of night amid the mountains and the sea.

“The dawn of night more fair than morning rose,  
Stars hurrying forth on stars, as snows on snows  
Haste when the wind and winter bid them speed.

All night long, in the world of sleep,  
Skies and waters were soft and deep;  
Shadow clothed them, and silence made  
Soundless music of dream and shade;  
All above us, the livelong night,  
Shadow kindled with sense of light;  
All around us the brief night long  
Silence laden with sense of song.

Stars and mountains without, we knew,  
 Watched and waited the soft night through ;  
 All unseen, but divined and dear,  
 Thrilled the touch of the sea's breath near ;  
 All unheard, but alive like sound,  
 Throbbled the sense of the sea's life round ;  
 Round us, near us, in depth and height,  
 Soft as darkness, and keen as light."

Rash the man who thwarts the witcheries of verse and meddles with the spells of genius by daring to visit for himself the scenes made most sacred and most beloved by the powers of poetry. Henceforth, the picture on the memory that was once so splendid and thrilling will be confused and blurred; as in a palimpsest, the older and dearer recollection will show but feebly through the new, and neither gives the same keen pleasure any more, As Wordsworth sang:—

"Be Yarrow stream unseen, unknown !  
 It must, or we shall rue it :  
 We have a vision of our own ;  
 Ah ! why should we undo it ?

The treasured dreams of times long past,  
 We'll keep them, winsome Marrow !  
 For when we're there, although 'tis fair,  
 'Twill be another Yarrow !"

Those who go on pilgrimage to Torridon will find it hard to follow Swinburne's actual footsteps, for the road he took is not to be recognized on any map. But, at all events, he came from the other side, from Loch Maree. The way I followed was across the moors between Strathcarron and Glen Torridon, the finest way of all, perhaps, for enjoying to the full the scenery of the glen. Looking back, one sees far down Loch Carron to the seaward hills, a confusion of violent contours; and then as we cross the watershed we have near views of the great peaks of Coulin Forest, Fuar Tholl and Sgùrr Ruadh, enclosing a deep and dark recess with a cirque of gloomy precipices. It had been my ambition to ascend those peaks on the way across to Torridon, but a stormy morning had put a stop to the project. All day there

were rapid and incessant changes in the weather : now, the limpid sky, the clear light on all the peaks, and their delusive look of nearness, made one long to be at them ; next moment they would be enveloped in wrathful cloud, and one thanked one's stars for the escape. These hills are composed of Torridon sandstone and quartzite ; their upper parts are bare of vegetation, and peculiarly desolate. So light is the hue of the rock, it is oftentimes hard to distinguish between the flash of a torrent and the gleaming of the quartzite. But now a still grander example of a quartzite mountain grows nearer and clearer across Glen Torridon.

“ Benyea, magnificent Alp,  
Blanched bare, and bald, and white,  
His forehead, like old sea-eagle's scalp,  
Seen athwart the sunset light.”

Ben Eighe strikes one at first sight as the weirdest of mountain shapes, as something elusive and unsubstantial. It is not the shape, however, that is so singular, but the colour, whitish pink blending into pure white and grey. With vast sea mists passing swiftly over it, now completely hidden and now revealed, it looked unreal and phantasmal. Seen from this side of Glen Torridon, Ben Eighe exhibits one type of mountain contour in perfection, the aerial majesty, the bold, free curves, without ruggedness, and with no suggestion of mystery or latent terror. The eastern summits appear as one, the western are massed together ; their arêtes sweep up from the glen in one unbroken line of beauty, and between the tips of Sgurr Ban and Spidean Coire nan Clach the ridge dips low in a gracious curve. Of the splintered peaks, the ruined and devastated corries, and the tremendous precipices behind, there is no hint in this calm and stately front. But the bare white screes are so extraordinary of aspect that to look straight at them does not tell whether the face before us is an easy slope or a series of headlong precipices. One exquisite feature of this side that rivets the eye is a slender sandstone pinnacle, set like a graceful, curving tusk at the peak of a lofty buttress towards Torridon.

Easan Dorcha, a fine impetuous river, thunders down a wooded glen from the corries of Beinn Liath Mhor, high on our left, and, reinforced by a lusty burn, becomes the Coulin river. The road crosses at the water's-meet, and in another mile skirts the fir-clad shores of Loch Coulin. Another good road mounts the glen of Easan Dorcha, but a notice-board warns the mountaineer to "keep off the turf," an injunction that applies practically to all these ranges, for this is one of the regions where the climber, the tourist, and the naturalist are classed among the noxious animals. Beyond the shooting-lodge, a sumptuous establishment, with well-kept grounds and gardens, the road re-crosses the river, between Loch Coulin and Loch Clair, and then emerges in Glen Torridon. There were nine weary miles of it, I found, to the village, and a heavier storm was threatening. It was a godsend to me when the mail-gig trotted up. A few moments earlier I had witnessed a phenomenon of enchanting loveliness. One arm of a broad, low rainbow was thrown across the face of a heathy hill. Though broken, it was clear and brilliant: several furlongs of dark peatmoss burned in wide tremulous zones of living, effulgent colour, that waxed and waned against the dreary moor as vividly as if they had been flung across the sky.

A mile west of Ben Eighe rises a still more astonishing mountain, most astounding because of the prodigious contrast between such close neighbours.

"Liaguch, rising sheer  
 From river-bed up to the sky,  
 Grey courses of masonry, tier on tier,  
 And pinnacles splintered on high !  
 Splintered, contorted, and riven  
 As though, from the topmost crown  
 Some giant plougher his share had driven  
 In a hundred furrows sheer down."

Liathach is built up mainly of purple Torridon sandstone, with a cap of white quartzite, which was not so conspicuous on this luring day. Tryfaen alone, among English and Welsh mountains, can be compared with its magnificent abruptness; but Liathach is bigger, higher, and steeper than

Tryfaen. Over Glen Torridon it hangs in four miles of precipices, and ends towards Ben Eighe in a great bluff that has been likened to "the stem of some mighty vessel plunging in a tempestuous sea." The mountain front is a huge succession of sandstone terraces, towering one over another, each faced with a far-extending wall of perpendicular cliff. When Liathach first came into view, the whole mountain was bare of mist, save for a few clouds swirling round Spidean a' Coire Leith, the central summit; the stark, beetling, triple-headed pyramid rising into the savage sky was an awe-inspiring sight. But a sea of mists came rolling up from Loch Torridon, and broke over Liathach and Ben Eighe. Both mountains were effaced, and we in the mail-gig pulled our waterproofs tightly round us to meet the onslaught of a furious squall. Then suddenly a blast came that rent to pieces the immense robe of mist enwrapping Liathach. In a moment, a million fragments of shattered cloud were eddying round the black colossus, and through them the giddy tiers of cliff, the cavernous hollows and gullies, and the beetling Fasarinen or pinnacles of Liathach, reft of all visible foundation, loomed in chaotic grandeur.

"Mysterious Glen Torridon,  
What marvels, night and day,  
Light, mist, and cloud will be working here  
When we are far away!"

Lochan an Iasgaich lies at the foot of a steep valley over against Liathach, under the western slope of Sgurr Dubh, nearest of the Coulin Forest peaks. Behind the tarn, in the hollow of the valley, hundreds upon hundreds of conical hillocks cover the ground, and have given the spot the Gaelic name of Coire Ceud Croc, the Valley of the Hundred Hills. They seem like a vast assemblage of human graves or barrows; but behind the strange multitude one looks up into the lofty corries, whence the glaciers descended long ago, and recognises them for what they are, the burthen thrown down by ancient ice-streams. High above

“On the further flank of the glen,  
Sweeping in wondrous line,  
Scourdhu, Benlia, Bendamh  
Their weirdly forms combine.”

We drove into Torridon in another stinging shower; night appeared to be descending on loch and glen before its time.

Under the threatening sides of Liathach, on a narrow strip between the mountain and the sea-loch, a line of miserable houses cowers, among them a few of slightly more comfortable appearance, one of which is the “Temperance Hotel,” a house seemingly of a single storey and two rooms, but rather more capacious inside. This modest house of entertainment was once an inn with a license, of which it was deprived some years ago, not so much in order to coerce the natives into sobriety, as to make the place as inhospitable as possible to tourists. One must run the risk of a good many discomforts and hardships to see Glen Torridon, unless one happens to own a yacht of moderate draught. I am unable to imagine where Swinburne found “the kindest of shelters” that he alludes to in his beautiful poem, the geography of which is rather perplexing, although, of course, one must be careful not to confound Upper Loch Torridon with the seaward portion of the loch. Entering the little hostel, I found myself in a large kitchen or hall, with old-fashioned furniture and a fine open fire-place. Though its glory must have departed with its license, it still appeared to be the resort of the males of the clan. Two or three men slouched out, and another came forward, and took me in charge. Soon my drenched clothes were steaming in front of the replenished fire; but it was not until the arrival of a tall Highland lassie, who had evidently been fetched in by one of the departed guests, that I was conducted into the other room, a modern one that contrasted curiously with the more primitive “ben.” There was yet another room in this compact little mansion, I discovered later, a tiny bedroom wedged into the wall-space between these just described. In what obscure corners of the structure the owners lived is the same

difficult question as often embarrasses one in the Highlands. However, I had been in far stranger lodgings, and was not in the least inclined to be critical. The kindness of the Highland landlady made up for all deficiencies.

“ Child of the far-off ocean flood !  
What wayward mood hath made thee fain  
To leave thy wide Atlantic main  
For this hill-girdled solitude ?  
To wind away through kyles and creeks,  
Past island, cliff, and promontory,  
And lose thyself 'mid grisly peaks  
And precipices scarred and hoary ?

But thou hast all unweeting come  
Where human joy hath long been dumb.  
A land by some strange woe o'ertaken,  
Of its own people nigh forsaken,  
Where those who linger still retain  
Dearth only, penury and pain,  
And wear that uncomplaining mood  
Which the too long continued stress  
Of sore privation hath subdued,  
Down to a hopeless passiveness.”

At Torridon, with the mountain wall behind, and the stormy loch before, stretching seaward into a night of tempest, one seems to have come to the end of the habitable world—“a grassless, fruitless, unsustaining shore!” Westward lies a shadowy Nifheim, so it seems, of perpetual mist, storm and darkness. Between the showers that swiftly followed each other, I made hurried excursions to the front door, to gaze seawards. The mountains of Shildaig Forest were vague and nebulous as storm-drift, one dim outline behind another, ending in great filmy shadows across the west. Storm pursuing storm up the length of the loch now erased and now intensified their lurking shapes. When I went to bed, the howling of the wind, the crash of rain on windows and roof, and the roar of waters from Liathach impending over us, a thousand fierce, barbaric voices, sounded in tumultuous chorus, whose mighty compass and immeasurable harmonies wrung the heart with awe and pity for this

forlorn home of humanity on the strip of earth between  
the mountains and the melancholy sea.

“O region! full of power and change  
Of aspect—boundless in thy range  
Of gloom and glory. . . . .

Through these peaks when the thunder is rolled,  
It were worth all the poems of men  
To hear the discourse these brethren hold  
As they shout over Torridon Glen

When the great Atlantic winds  
Come blowing with rack and rain,  
From its caves and crannies the glen unbinds  
The peal of how grand a refrain!

And then, when the storms are o'er,  
And relapse to the solemn sleep—  
The mountain Sabbath that ever more  
A sanctuary here doth keep!

With silence, sound, light and mist,  
Labouring or lying still,  
Painter or poet, or whate'er thou list,  
What, compared with thine, their skill

To lift, or o'erawe the heart?  
The power that dwells in thee,  
Simple, sublime, and strong as thou art,  
Is of Eternity.”

—*Principal Shairp.*