

MY INTRODUCTION TO THE CAIRNGORMS.

BY THE LATE ALEXANDER COPLAND.

PART III.

NEXT morning, which was Thursday, we arose without the slightest sensation of headache, although unaccustomed to nightcaps of toddy brewed from Lochnagar whisky the partaking of which we imagined was the proper thing to observe and do in the Highlands. My companion, however, when informed of the mileage to and from Beinn Muich Dhui, having demurred to undertake the journey, the honour of the accomplishment of the expedition devolved upon me, and I felt obliged to endeavour to execute the trust. Of course I had to get the assistance of a guide. Accordingly Willie MacIntosh, who lived with his old father and mother in a thatched cabin—"a but and a ben"—at Auchindryne on the brink of the Cluny Water, was engaged for that duty and about 9 o'clock a.m. the expedition, duly equipped, set out. The weather was again all that could be desired except as regards the temperature, which was tropical. The road westwards towards Corrymulzie, as everyone knows who has seen it before the advent of motor cars, was one of the finest for walking or driving on, free from mud and dust, and delightfully and picturesquely shaded by well-grown pines, larches, birch and other trees, the beauty of whose foliage greatly added to the pleasure of the wayfarer as did the aroma they diffused in the morning air.

Before reaching Corrymulzie (about 3 miles from the Castleton) the delta of the water of Quoich displayed the havoc caused by a highland stream when in flood, and in the far distance to the north west the summits of Beinn Muich Dhui and his near neighbours were pointed out in the sky line and of course specially interested me. At that time Corrymulzie was called Mar Lodge and Old Mar

Lodge on the opposite side of the Dee occupied the site now covered by the buildings of New Mar Lodge which was built a few years ago for his Highland residence by the late Duke of Fife soon after the destruction by fire of the buildings at Corrymulzie. At the time of my journey Mar Forest was held under Lease by the Duke of Leeds from the trustees of the Earl of Fife and the Earl of Fife was then alive. No objection was made to our crossing the Dee by a wooden bridge which then occupied the site of the present Victoria Bridge and passing in front of Mar Lodge, we took the road uphill through the forest of the Doire Braghad leading to Glen Lui which shortened our route by about a couple of miles as compared with the road by the Linn of Dee. Between Mar Lodge and Glen Lui there were a good many magnificent pines on both sides of our route, remnants of the old Caledonian forest, and uphill, on our right, extensive thickets of birch—all nature planted—contorted and gnarled. When we emerged from the wood and descended into Glen Lui near a wooden bridge now called the "black brig," the appearance of the Glen gave a pleasant surprise, showing as it did a comparatively wide and extensive basin about 2 miles long covered with short thick vivid green pasture through which the water of Lui—a bright clear stream—wound in many a fold. The close cropped condition of the pasture was accounted for by this glen being a favourite resort of red deer for feeding during night. When the golden orb of day is gradually sinking in the west and the shadows are creeping towards the summit of the mountains the red deer untormented by flies steal down the slopes of the hills to feed on the rich pasture in the glens. The ruins of some dwellings midway up the glen also indicated that at one time saeters or chalets had been occupied, as in Norway or Switzerland at the present day, while mountain pastures were browsed upon during summer by the bestial of cottars. Permanent occupation of dwellings—if such there was—could only have been to a very limited extent in Glen Lui and existence there must have been miserable and precarious when compared with the requirements of

modern life. 'Back to the land' in such localities is therefore a vain hope and cry. Grain would not ripen at altitudes of 1,000 feet above sea level nor provender for winter feeding of sheep or cattle be produced to sustain them. At the present time the red deer are frequently fed in Glen Lui and Glen Derry by foreign hay drawn there in sledges, to keep them from starvation.

For the greater part Glen Lui is devoid of trees, but on reaching its junction with Glen Lui Beg and Glen Derry on the level ground in these glens and on the slopes of the hills some very fine specimens of *pinus sylvestris* were to be seen. A wooden footbridge near Glen Derry Lodge enabled us to cross the Derry Water to its right bank, and keeping the foot track through the forest parallel with the stream, we re-crossed the stream at another wooden bridge about two miles farther on. Near this bridge—by means of a bulwark thrown across the stream—the water of Derry had been impounded till it formed a lake, the water whereof, by suitable opening was from time to time utilized as artificial floods to float the timber cut down in Glen Derry to the river Dee. Between this foot bridge and Coire Etchachan, about two miles further on, the bottom of Glen Derry is covered by a sward similar to that of Glen Lui. It is bounded on the west by Cairngorm of Derry (3,788 feet) on the east by Beinn Bhreac (3,051 feet) while its northern end is closed by lofty Beinn Mheadhoin whose huge granite barns crest the sky at 3,883 feet and its grand gothic-shaped precipice fronts the northern side of Coire Etchachan. The summit of this precipice (3,551 feet) is 1,327 feet above the ford opposite to it in the bottom of the Coire and displays a magnificent example of rock cutting by the glacier which gouged out the coire in its course from Beinn Muich Dhui to Glen Derry.

About half-a-mile westward from the ford in the Derry at the head of Glen Derry we came to another ford where a considerable stream from the high ground on the south side of Coire Etchachan joins the Derry Water from Loch Etchachan at an altitude of 2,244 feet. The ground

rapidly rises from this point for the three-fourths of a mile to the top of the coire where it touches the 3,000 feet contour line, and as the day was excessively hot without a breath of wind in the coire, I was so scorched by the merciless sunshine reflected from the rocks on Beinn Mheadhoin that the skin on the backs of my hands and on my nose painfully resembled the cuticle of the new potato. Under such circumstances botanising in the coire was not to be thought of, but I may say that nowhere else have I seen the great bilberry (*vaccinium uliginosum*) in such magnificent bloom or the sea-gilliflower so tall and vigorous as under the rocks on the south side of this corry where also the true cranberry (*vaccinium oxycoccos*) as well as *vaccinium vitis idaea*, the cow-berry, commonly misnamed and sold as the cranberry, may be found.

Immediate relief from the distressing heat of Coire Etchachan was afforded when we reached the brink of the coire and faced a gentle breeze rippling the glittering surface of Loch Etchachan. Our path at 3,094 feet at the east end of the loch rapidly rose through stones and rough gravel, and turned southwards, having small cairns of stones built and placed at convenient distances to point its course. Notwithstanding the sterility of the slope we were traversing, here and there we saw springs framed in vivid green by moss, among which the bright stars of *saxifraga stellaris* raised their pretty heads. To my surprise I saw for the first time variegated carpets of the moss campion—*silene acaulis*—spread, compelling admiration.

Before leaving Loch Etchachan let me say that it measures by the six-inch Ordnance Plan half-a-mile long by three furlongs broad. Its depth I do not know. Its basin is situated at an altitude of 680 feet above Loch Avon, and from the nature of its drainage area its water must be purer than the water of Loch Avon can possibly be. It contains trout and to prolong their existence they must hibernate in some way, possibly in the ooze at the bottom of the loch, as the ice on the surface of the

water during winter gathers early, acquires exceptional thickness, and endures for a long period. Besides Loch Etchachan, Beinn Muich Dhui is ornamented by two lochans—Lochan Uaine encircled by the range of precipice facing north east from Sron Riach of Beinn Muich Dhui, whose ridge marks 3,811 feet above the lochan, the basin of which rests at 3,142 feet and is so shaded from the sun that I have seen its surface covered with ice in the month of June. This lochan is the source of the Lui water. Lochan Buidhe (the small yellow loch) about a mile-and-a-half almost due north from the summit cairn of Beinn Muich Dhui which discharges through the Feith Buidhe (the yellow bog) into Loch Avon is the other lochan referred to. This, I take it, is the highest lochan in the Cairngorm range of mountains, and so far as I know in Great Britain. It rests at 3,683 feet above sea level.

Resuming the foot track leading to the summit of the mountain, at an altitude of about 3,750 feet, we passed between a small tarn fed from a perennial field of snow and the long range of lofty precipice which encircles and closes the northern end of Glen Lui Beg. As the view from here down the glen mentioned is sublime, my guide failed not to plant me in a position where, like Shakespeare's Edgar on the sea cliff at Dover, I had good occasion to feel and say

“How fearful
And dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low!”

as up to that time I never had occasion or opportunity to occupy a position so elevated.

Beside this tarn there are numerous blocks of stone huddled together forming with the other amenities a favourite nesting place for the ptarmigan. In the breeding season I never failed to get an exhibition at this place, of the natural deceitfulness of the hen bird. Oh, she is cunning! No sooner is she surprised by the unexpected appearance of mankind in this remote solitude than she assumes an appearance of extreme invalidity—from chronic rheumatism one might naturally suppose. She shoggles

along the ground with trailing wings awakening your feelings of pity and commiseration. But should you follow, and attempt to pat her on the back, she somehow always manages to keep beyond the reach of your fingers until having drawn you to a safe distance from her nest or young she takes vigorous flight chuckling at her success in humbugging you.

Ascending about other 250 feet we reached what I will call the grand plateau of the mountain a vast expanse of rough gravel dotted with stones and gently sloping upwards towards the west where at a distance of about half-a-mile there is pointed out the roofless walls of a dwelling, where in 1847 a detachment of the sappers and miners abode while engaged in making the trigonometrical survey of our country. A few yards further north-westwards we reached the cairn erected by the sappers, where for the first time I gazed in wonder and delight on the magnificent view enclosed in the horizon as seen from this position.

Our return was made by Cairngorm of Derry into Glen Derry. About half way between the outlet from the ancient dam to Coire Etchachan we rested and drank from the living water of the "Well of the Mountain Maiden," as it gushed forth in perennial and affluent flow from the side of Beinn Bhreac. Strange to say this well has never so far as I know been baptised with a Gaelic christian or surname. Let us then supply this unpardonable omission and call it Tobair nan Monadh Maigdeaan. If that Gaelic is not classical let it be made so. While sitting at this well, MacIntosh directed my attention to the sky line of the opposite mountain range where a small splash of snow indicated a snow bridge under which a burn was tumbling over a precipice into Coire an Lochaine Uaine of Cairngorm of Derry. This coire, as I afterwards found, and as its name indicates, contains a small tarn by the side of which it is said a poetic poacher of the name of Smith built himself a bower and enjoyed connubial bliss in his lofty abode. That would be about the beginning of last century when deer forests were very moderately rented, and long before percussion locks or breech-loaders were thought of. Still

poaching, however excusable to the natural mind of man, was liable to punishment, and Smith was an outlaw. His capture was determined on, and John Monro, chief forester in the Forest of Mar, being ambitious to accomplish that single-handed, set out one day with high expectations of success. Smith, however, was a cunning rogue, and spying Monro proceeded to stalk him. The day being sultry, and the tramp a long one, Monro sat down to rest and immediately lay down and fell asleep. Now was Smith's opportunity, and perceiving it he scrawled on a bit of paper the following doggerel:—

“ Here lies John Monro takin' his rest,
Let him sleep on—quietness is best,”

and instantly and silently made off, after attaching to Monro's coat this billet-doux. The result, when the discovery of the bit of paper was made by the friends of Monro, and communicated to him, may be imagined but not described.

Arrived at the outlet from Coire Etchachan we forded the Derry by flying leaps from boulder to boulder, ice-polished, but resting fast in the bed of the stream. The foot-track then winded westwards among a succession of moraines, deposits from the glacier which at a remote period crept downwards and eastwards to Glen Derry. Among these moraines near the side of the stream, the unexpected sometimes happens in the wilderness. I once lighted on a baby's shoe—so small as to have belonged to a child in arms. How came it there? I could not suppose that such a child could have formed one of a party going to or returning from Ben Muich Dhui. Could the child have been carried off by an eagle? Sherlock Holmes might have been able to solve the problem. I ultimately concluded that the baby had been the child of a tinker who had rested here on the passage from Abernethy to Braemar, the Larig Laoigh being the postal road between these places before the railway came into existence. On another occasion after crossing the Derry by the boulders at the ford I lighted upon the carcase of a fawn newly killed and

only a day or two old. One of the hind legs had been torn away, and I concluded an eagle or fox had been the murderer. I cut off the head and one of the fore legs under the knee and took them to Derry Lodge as evidence of the bloody deed.

We reached Castleton in the evening. My companion had fortunately been able to visit Loch Callater and was much pleased with his outing. After deliberation we resolved on the morrow, with the assistance of MacIntosh and a garron, to tackle Glen Tilt, and did so, notwithstanding the Duke's opposition, which however had by that time become less persistent owing to the complexion of the right-of-way case in the Court of Session.