

THE CIRCUIT OF THE CAIRNGORMS.

BY JOHN CLARKE.

FOR long it had been an ambition to accomplish the round of the four great Cairngorm peaks in a day. There was never any idea of creating a "record," a form of cheap fame to which few sensible men aspire. But one beautiful day some twenty years ago (1890) the Club climbed Braeriach and Cairn Tual, and as we sat at the cairn of the latter, Mackintosh of the Derry or Donald Fraser hinted the possibility of descending the face of the mountain on which we were and ascending the opposite face of Ben Muich Dhui—a most fascinating prospect at the moment, when the mountain air was in our head; and ever since that day a kind of mental resolve had been registered to combine, if possible, the whole series of the central peaks in a single excursion. The individual mountains had become very familiar in the course of many holidays spent on Deeside and Speyside, each had been ascended half-a-dozen or even half-a-score of times, and by different routes and in varied combination; so that the nature of the task was fully realised, and the risks, as far as might be, provided for, while a safe line of retreat was always kept open. Alternative routes were carefully considered, and by the time the execution of the scheme had become feasible, it was believed that absolutely the best under the conditions had been decided upon.

The central mass of the Cairngorms, as most readers of the *Journal* are probably aware, consists of two main groups, on the west Cairn Tual (4241), and Braeriach (4248); and on the east Ben Muich Dhui (4296), and Cairngorm (4084). Between the two groups runs the deep cleft of the Larig Ghru, effectually cutting them off from one another, while forming, for that very reason, the great pass or mountain thoroughfare through the range from Deeside to Speyside. The summit of the Larig attains a

height of 2,733 feet, roughly 1,500 feet lower than the peaks that surround it; but, as a matter of fact, it would be impracticable to cross from the one group to the other anywhere near the summit of the pass, so that the descent involved, as well as the ascent on the other side, is considerably greater, about a half more, say 2,250 feet. The arrangement and relative positions of the peaks are such that the northern members of either group—Braeriach and Cairngorm—stand comparatively widely apart; but the southern pair—Cairn Tual and Ben Muich Dhui—confront each other at close quarters, at least to the eye, across the yawning gulf of the Larig. Another material fact is that while Cairn Tual and Ben Muich Dhui are, so to speak, on or near the same parallel of latitude, Cairngorm extends away to the north beyond the position of Braeriach. A glance at the map will show exactly what is meant, as well as its bearing upon the inclusion of the two groups in one round. The base of attack must be from Speyside, so as to allow the crossing of the Larig between Cairn Tual and Ben Muich Dhui, or Ben Muich Dhui and Cairn Tual, if that order is preferred. If, on the other hand, a start is made from Deeside, the passage from Braeriach to Cairngorm or conversely, would be tedious in the extreme and would go far to defeat the attempt, besides rendering the excursion a much less interesting one. When Speyside is the starting point the approach to the first peak and the descent of the last, as will further appear as we proceed, save us altogether from the space intervening directly between them. For this reason I never seriously thought of the excursion during the many holidays and delightful times that have been spent at Braemar since 1882. Two years ago, when at Aviemore, we waited expectantly for an opportunity to make the attempt, for a whole week, the last of our holidays, but the clouds never once broke. The only doubt existing in one's mind when the task came to be actually tackled, was whether the first climb should be Cairngorm or Braeriach; by the selection here the subsequent order is automatically determined. For long the inclination was toward Cairngorm, an easy climb which

requires a short time, and at once sets you on the heights, where everything becomes easy as one feels that rapid progress is being made. On the other hand, the prospect of the tramp from Braeriach through Rothiemurchus at the end of a long day is not inspiring; if that ground had to be covered, let it be got over as early as possible, that is, begin with it and so with Braeriach. On that again depended another question—how to reach the foot of the mountains. Boat of Garten was our summer quarters, and the first idea was to drive from it to Loch Morlich for Cairngorm, and have the conveyance waiting at Loch Eunach on the return journey. But on reflection this seemed to savour rather of the armchair sportsman, and it was resolved to trust to nature's resources save for the aid of the humble "wheel." This decision helped to solve the question of the order of the route. Cycles must be taken to Loch Morlich, and in order to reach them as soon as possible at night after leaving the hills we should get over the tedious part of the walk first, and so adopt the order, Braeriach, Cairn Tual, Ben Muich Dhui, Cairngorm. This being settled there remained the question of the weather. In order to find a parallel to the year 1912 we must go back to 1902 or even 1879. Mist, cloud, rain, wind, cold, in alternating succession made up much of what ordinarily constitutes the "summer" months. August in particular was the reverse of ideal, whether for climbing or other outdoor occupation. Still, there came lucid intervals, and one of these had to be anticipated and utilised; the pity was, that with unsettled conditions and uncertain outlook a sufficiently early start could not be made to give the expedition a fair chance. On Tuesday we were stirring at 7 a.m., only to decide to postpone the start, and well, as it proved, we did so. On Wednesday, at the same hour, the prospect was not unpromising—that's as far as the truth will carry us—and as the barometer was fairly steady, the die must be cast. By 8.15 the preparations are made and our cycles are ready. The route is by Kincardine and through the Sluggan to Loch Morlich. The road on the pass is steep and rough, many gates have to be opened and

shut again, and the 7 or 8 miles take a full hour. Cycles are discarded and bestowed in a safe resting-place, and the tramp begins at exactly 9.30 a.m., an undesirably late hour, it must be admitted, but it could not be helped. There would be few delays *en route* we hoped; there were but two of us, myself and my younger son (Ian), and we hoped to last the time and the pace. A preliminary cycle run of 75 miles through Banff, Elgin, Nairn and Inverness, an ascent of Sgor an Dubh, with various lesser climbs, had induced a certain degree of "condition," a prime requisite for such an undertaking.

Starting from the west end of Loch Morlich, we took the road toward the Larig, now for half its length a light railway for the conveyance of timber to the sawmill at present at work by the loch. By-and-bye a slight bend was made to the left, and the line laid for Carn Elrick, opposite to which the Larig path was struck, that is, a mile or two above the Allt-na-Bienne bridge. For another mile or two the Larig track was followed, and at a convenient point not far from where the Allt Druidh comes down on the right the path was abandoned, and the ascent of the ridge on the right was tackled. This ridge is the buttress of the well-known nose of the Larig (Sron na Leirg), the huge, beetling crag which confronts the Lurcher's Crag at the north entrance of the Larig pass. A gradual, sometimes steep, ascent leads to the top of the Sron na Leirg, which is a ridge rather than a peak, then there is a descent of some 200 feet to a narrow nek, and again an ascent of about 500 feet to the summit of Braeriach. At this part of the ascent, that is, in the neighbourhood of, and above the nek, the corries on either side approach within twenty yards of one another, and the least deviation toward either side would be fraught with danger, or even disaster. As the ridge of the Sron na Leirg was approached, a huge eagle floated majestically along it and disappeared behind it, an omen which an old pagan might have interpreted, according to his humour or his wishes, as prophetic of conquest or of disaster. To the mountaineer of more matter-of-fact cast it was at least

an interesting and picturesque incident. Judging from this and similar recent experiences, eagles are much more numerous than they once were in the higher mountains. The latter part of the ascent of Braeriach brings us to the series of great corries, the grandest and most awe-inspiring of all the Cairngorm corries, eating into both sides of Braeriach, as it were, and extending right round to the Angel's Peak and Cairn Tual. On the right hand there is the triple series on the north of Braeriach, so conspicuous all along Speyside—from east to west, Coire Bennie, Coire Ruadh, Coire an Lochain; on the left the other triple series running out toward Lochan Uaine and Cairn Tual, named from north to south Coire Ruadh, Coire Bhrochain, Fuar Gharbh-choire. The generic name for this second series is Garrachory, a term applying also to the burn, which, rising on the upper plateau, tumbles down the precipitous face, and constitutes the larger part of the Dee at this early portion of its course.

The first objective, the Cairn of Braeriach, was reached at a quarter to one o'clock, 12.43 to be exact. Fresh snow coated portions of the cairn and was congealed into pieces of ice, a subsequent fall to that which, earlier in the month, had covered the mountains down to 2,500 feet, or lower. There was a biting and an eager air on the heights, and lunch, which was taken at the Garrachory, was something of a Passover meal. As the great corries were thereafter successively rounded, by way of the March Cairn and beyond, the near views were of the grandest description, the view-point shifting at every step, and the mountains changing their relative positions so rapidly that one had to reflect in order to identify the individual peaks from time to time. In the depths below toward the Larig were what seemed "the fragments of an earlier world"; a step in that direction would be one's last. The risks of traversing the plateau in mist became very apparent, but meantime the coast was clear and the elements propitious. As Braeriach was left, a large party from Glen Eunach direction, one of them a lady on horseback, appeared in the offing; this was the only trace of life in this quarter. The Angel's Peak,

marked on the Club map as Sgor an Lochan Uaine (4,095,) the beautiful symmetrical peak running out a little to the north of Cairn Tual, though not on the programme, was too tempting to be omitted. The view well repaid the short delay entailed. The line thence to Cairn Tual opened up on the right, in addition to the sources of the Eidart, Loch Suarach, with Monadh Mor beyond, the long ridge that closes the Dee valley as seen from Braemar—Ben Bhrottain and the curious knot, Cairn Cloich Mhuilinn on its side. The summit of Cairn Tual was reached at 2.25, and here the main problem of the day presented itself—by what route was the descent to be made to the Larig, and the ascent thence to Ben Muich Dhui? Both cairns were visited (4,241, 4,227 feet in height respectively, the south one being the lower), and the merits of the arête on the left, i.e., north, and the Soldier's Corrie on the right, were canvassed. The latter, already in some measure familiar, is the longer, if easier, and would have led to the Tailor's Burn as the route to Ben Muich Dhui. The arête toward Lochan Uaine combined directness with—it was hoped—a sufficient degree of safety, and choice was accordingly made of it.

The event justified the choice. The ground is certainly rough, and incautiousness or misadventure might lead to a dislodgement of stones that would prove perilous. But the descent was made with care, and without mishap. Below the arête, i.e., about the altitude of Lochan Uaine, a dry bed of a stream, intermittent, as the grassy character of the ground showed, was struck, and led right down to the bottom. The retrospect revealed the fact that this was the one continuous line of grass on the whole face. There are, no doubt, other lines of descent, but much less secure and comfortable, on account of the steep, shifting scree. The descent of this face is not to be recommended to a novice, and should not be attempted except in clear weather. The valley gained, the Garrachory burn was crossed close to its junction with the Dee, some 2,000 feet lower than the point at which lunch had been taken by the stream side on the plateau. Then the Dee itself was passed, and the

climb began up the steep slope of Ben Muich Dhui by the side of the Allt a Choire Mhoir. This is the burn at which, near its source, lunch is usually taken by those who make the ascent of Ben Muich Dhui. It rises a little to the north of the summit, and tumbles down to join the Dee a little above the Garrachory, and of course on the opposite side. Up to this point the day had held up well had indeed been quite fine though a little hazy. As, however, the summit of Ben Muich Dhui was approached, there were manifest indications that a change was brewing. Above was an ominous darkness, behind, mists were creeping over the peaks and corries lately left on the opposite side of the Larig gorge. Near the source of the burn a short halt was made for afternoon "tea." One began to speculate, at this altitude, whether the Garrachory or the Allt a Choire Mhoire could claim to be the highest source of the Dee. Probably it is the latter, though in point of quantity its contribution will not bear comparison with the Garrachory. From the top of the burn a dash was made into the mist, now fast thickening. The top of Ben Muich Dhui is so familiar ground that no difficulty was experienced in making a bee line for the cairn, time close upon 5 p.m. Back into the mist the line lay north and north-east for the last of the giants, which, it was fully realised, there might be some difficulty in exactly striking. While the plateau is for the most part broad, at places extensive, it is guarded on one side by the Larig and the corries between the Lurcher's Crag and Cairngorm, on the other by the broken and often precipitous ground toward Corrie Etchachan and Loch Avon. A descent of 400-500 feet brought daylight again; the direction had been correctly laid, and it was a comfort to know this, and to be able to make out the route ahead almost as far as the base of the Cairngorm cone. The Garbh Uisge was passed, then the Feith Buidhe with its source, Lochan Buidhe to the left. These streams, especially the latter, are the beginnings of the Avon, the great natural settling pond of which, Loch Avon, was by-and-bye descried far below. Abundant opportunity presented itself of sampling

the water of the whole watershed, as, earlier in the day, there had been of testing the various streams that combine to form the Dee. Personal preference inclines to the Dee itself as it issues from the Pools of Dee; the Allt a Choire Mhoir is also beautiful water. Any deduction from the mere sensation to the palate would, however, require to be largely supplemented from other sides. In the high altitudes the sources of Dee and Avon are alike unexceptionable, the waters being everywhere of the purest, and sweetest, and coolest.

After the Feith Buidhe two ridges had still to be crossed before the final goal was attained, and at one point on the nek between the Avon basin and the corries facing toward Loch Morlich, there was a veritable *mauvais quart d'heure*. The mist zone had been reached again, and the mist had degenerated into the Scotch variety, which is of the genus rain, the wind was fast rising from a southerly direction, and glorious failure seemed at one point a not remote contingency. Maps were consulted, the compass was invoked, and then the direction laid and resolutely adhered to. The reward was not far off; the drag of the ascent of the cone was felt—perceptibly, severely—giving assurance that the goal was at hand. The check had been due to a very simple cause. A slight descent, hardly noticeable in clear weather, got magnified in the mist into a drop toward either side—toward Loch Avon in this case; a few yards led clear of it, and all was well. The cairn of the last peak, for which all Cairngormers have such a special regard, was struck at last, just after 6.30 p.m. The final objective had been attained, wrung from the secret of the mist. One could not be other than thankful to have accomplished the undertaking, and to have escaped the danger which had for a moment threatened to balk it at the very end. Short time was available for reflection, not to say for rest. The ground was again familiar. A confident plunge was made forward into the mist, the wind, now a gale, rendering assistance even to excess. A descent of 600-800 feet cleared the mist and revealed Loch Morlich right ahead.

The descent of Cairngorm by the ordinary route is never very exciting, indeed, rather a "grind," to which this occasion proved no exception. The evenings draw in quickly in autumn; by the time Glenmore had been reached, Loch Morlich was growing murky under the gathering night. Cycles were reached near the west end of the loch just at 8.15 p.m., the walking part of the expedition having occupied, including stoppages, exactly $10\frac{3}{4}$ hours. Lighting up time was hardly due in open country and good roads, but the Sluggan fulfils neither condition. Besides, there was only one lamp, and it soon refused to perform its office! Under the shadow of woods and in the departing light of an autumn evening circumspection is not only a virtue but a necessity. Once the Speyside road was reached at Kincardine there was a clear and rapid run back. The advance guard reached "the Boat" at 9.15 p.m., the rearguard a little later. Friendly shelter and the comforts of the bath soon restored normal conditions. The four Cairngorms, including the Angel's Peak, had been surmounted in a working day with much satisfaction and with keen enjoyment. It is to be hoped that some enterprising member of the Club or other mountaineer may be encouraged to repeat the experience; one would like to vary the route at least to the extent of starting with Cairngorm. The walking distance of the circuit as carried out must have been at least 28 miles, to which 14 or 15 miles' cycling must be added. The actual climbing was not much, if anything, short of 7,000 feet.

Much of interest that presented itself has not been touched on. The variety of scene and view-point afforded some fresh experience at every step. For example, the towering Cairn Tual, the airy Angel's peak, with sheer declivities on either hand cut off as with a knife, or, at the lower levels, the crossing of the Dee under the triple amphitheatre of the Garrachory, with the steeps of Ben Muich Dhui facing; each is, in its own way, unrivalled. But where all is so grand, it is almost invidious to particularise.

Of living things the high peaks exhibit great paucity. The tops of Cairn Tual and Ben Muich Dhui are a wilderness of boulders, where neither animal nor plant could live—the veritable “riddlings of creation.” The fauna and flora of the lower slopes are more abundant. A golden wagtail was observed on one of the lower streams. Higher up snow buntings were frequent, and there were hosts of ptarmigan, many of them very tame, whether through jealousy of their young or unacquaintance with man. Mosses and lichens are the chief representatives of the vegetable kingdom, to which are to be added a few ferns in favoured spots, the *salix herbacea*, and occasional patches of moss campion (*silene acaulis*). It need hardly be said that many deer were seen at different points; and there are a few grouse on the lower heather slopes.

As stated at the outset, there was no record-hunting in the excursion. The first object was to have a day among the mountains, and to enjoy those scenes at once so soothing and so stimulating to the lover of nature, for which he willingly pays the price demanded. If that could be combined with a long-cherished ambition to test the possibilities of a summer day well filled up, so much the better. Among many glorious mountain rangings in the beautiful country which nature has placed at our door, this will remain a red letter day of unfading memory, all the more precious from the dashes of difficulty and uncertainty with which it was checkered.

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