

GLEN GAIRN.

VISITORS to Ballater will be familiar with a picture post-card depicting the view looking northward from the Bridge of Gairn. The scene is a very picturesque one—of the character commonly termed “romantic.” The channel of the river here is narrow and tortuous, and the spreading branches of the trees which line the banks on each side approach so closely as almost to completely screen the stream and form a continuous background. Such a conjunction of water and foliage is always charming, and thus the Bridge of Gairn is to Ballater visitors an attractive spot and “popular” accordingly.

The scene described is rather adventitious; it is not at all representative of the river. It might be termed, indeed, the river's sole beauty-spot. The Gairn owns the distinction of being the largest and longest tributary of the Dee, rising near the top of Ben Avon at an altitude of 3550 feet,* and wending its way twenty miles east-south-eastward till it joins the Dee about a quarter of a mile below the bridge just mentioned. But it cannot be called a picturesque river. It is simply a Highland stream, flowing for the most part over a stony bed and furnishing that pleasing music which has happily inspired a contemporary novelist, in describing a similar stream in Perthshire, to remark that “the sound of running water is the sweetest in nature.” It has no particular features—no conspicuous linns or rocky gorges, nothing of

* Between the summit of Ben Avon and Clach a' Chuitseich rises Allt an Eas Mhoir (the burn of the big waterfall). It is the principal head stream of the Gairn, another rising near the Quoich, with Craig na Dala Moire on its left and Craig na Dala Bige on its left bank. Cairn Eas (3556 feet) is to the north of Craig na Dala Moire and to the east of Dubh Lochan.—Monograph, “The Cairngorm Club Excursion to Ben a' Bhuid and Ben Avon, 13th July 1891,” by Alex. Inkson McConnochie.

The solid roar

Of thunderous waterfalls and torrents hoarse ;
nor is any special charm contributed to it by the character of the region through which it runs.

There is, it is true, a certain element of the picturesque in the lower portion of Glen Gairn. For four or five miles up from the bridge the river flows through a narrow valley enclosed by hills, the valley being dotted with farms and the lower slopes of the hillsides clothed with birches, those most graceful of trees ; and the scenic effects are not inconsiderable. A road runs on each side of the valley, both roads being of the "switchback" order, with steep gradients and corresponding declivities, and from the crests of the "switchbacks" one may obtain a number of pleasing views. These roads, penetrating a glen with many turnings, are alluring to a pedestrian. One or two walks along them were specified in a former article,* and it may here be added that the road on the east side of the glen (the left bank of the river) leads to Morven Lodge, at the base of Morven, and also, by a diversion through Glen Finzie, to Tornahaish, in Strathdon, while from the road on the west side, a road strikes off at Rinloan, and, crossing the Gairn by a General Wade bridge, also leads to Tornahaish and to Corgarff: the walk to Strathdon by either route—from Deeside to Donside, that is—may be warmly recommended. At Rinloan, however, whatever scenic qualities may be attributed to the Gairn or to Gairnside come to an end. Beyond that, the glen possesses very little attraction in the way of picturesqueness.

Nevertheless, for the purpose of seeing what it is really like, and also of having a good walk, I set out one day last summer to "do" Gairnside. The glen begins at Loch Builg—to be precise, a little below that rather dreary-looking sheet of water ; the river Gairn, prior to passing below Loch Builg, is simply a streamlet coursing down the slopes of Ben Avon. How to get to

* *Delectable Days on Deeside*, "C.C.J.", viii, 16-17.

Loch Builg? There is a road to it striking off the north Deeside road a mile or so beyond Balmoral, but as this road goes first to Rinloan, one would have to walk to Loch Builg from Rinloan and walk back the same way. Not good enough! I took, instead, the road (about a mile farther west) leading alongside the Feardar Burn, better known as the Aberarder road—incidentally getting introduced thereby to an old mission church of the existence of which I must confess to having been ignorant. I have a suspicion that I went too far along this road, but, making inquiries at the first farm-house I came to, I was directed to a most charming “green road”—a roadway of springy turf, delightfully elastic to the tread, skirting the edge of a birch plantation.

All too soon this road emerged from the plantation and lost its fine properties, becoming rougher and rougher as it ascended one hillside and, crossing a dip in the ground, wound up another hillside in front. The ascent of the second hillside was made by two lengthy traverses, lined by walls now very much broken down. I had been advised to “take the hill” at these “dykes” and make for a deer fence, and so save a couple of miles. I have no doubt the advice was sound, but I was not concerned about saving time or distance and so kept to the road. To make the story of a long walk short, the road, I may say, is one running on the east side of Culardoch, and was laid out about 1880 as a substitute for the Bealach Dearg road to Loch Builg on the west side of the hill, when that road was closed and included in an extension of the Invercauld deer forest which was then made. For miles the road runs more or less alongside the aforesaid deer fence—or the deer fence runs alongside it—and to the right of the road is an extensive valley, evidently of peat; Monaltrie Moss is the name on the map. The whole region around is wild and lonely in the extreme, the principal relief to the prevailing monotony of the scenery being Loch Builg, seen a long way off, with the eastern summit of

Ben Avon towering above it. But the day was fine and bright, though the wind was a trifle tempestuous, and the walk accordingly was highly pleasurable.

In due course, I reached Loch Builg—or, rather, the road from it leading down Gairnside: I did not bother going up to the Loch itself, though it was no great distance away. The Culardoch road along which I had been walking for four miles or so gradually dips into the valley, crosses the Gairn by a bridge, and, rising a little, joins the Glen Gairn road just beyond the last of the four lochans which lie to the south of Loch Builg. I was thus placed on the left bank of the Gairn, and very soon the road brought me close to the river, here a stream of no great width or depth. Given a sunny afternoon, however, it is a delight to walk alongside a rippling river, even if its course be only, like that of the Gairn, through low, bare, brown hills of no character. There is refreshment in the mountain air, an exhilaration of spirit is induced as well, and one insensibly becomes buoyant and cheerful, forgetful of the world and all its cares. The miles may seem long, but no tedium is felt; the distances covered but enhance the enjoyment experienced.

“Landmarks by the way” down Gairnside are few and far between. You walk right past the front of Corndavon Lodge, with its backing of pine trees—the solitary plantation in the upper reaches of the Gairn. At Daldounie you swing from the left to the right bank of the river, crossing by an iron girder bridge, the imposing character of which strikes you, so incongruous it seems in this remote and little traversed region; you may learn later that this was the bridge erected over the Gairn near Ballater to carry the projected extension of the Deeside Railway. After crossing it, the road ascends the hillside and you lose sight of the river for some time. At this stage of my walk, evening began to set in. The light faded, the glory of the day vanished, the expanse of brown moorland hills before me became almost dreary,

assuming a sombre and somewhat melancholy aspect. Soon after, Gairnshiel Lodge (opposite Rinloan) came into view afar off. I had just noted it when the road took a sudden bend backward and I appeared to be walking away from Gairnshiel—proceeding up the glen as it were, instead of down. I was momentarily puzzled, and, asking for an explanation from a passing native, was hardly comforted by his indifferent reply:—
 “Ou aye, there’s a short cut to Rinloan if ye’d only kent far to tak’ it. Ye’re owre far past it noo, onywe!” The long round brought me at last to Rinloan, however; and from this the course onward was clear—right along the “switchback” to the Bridge of Gairn.

Perhaps it may be well (for others inclined to follow in my footsteps) to set down the distances given on a notice-board at Bridge of Gairn:—Gairnshiel, 5 miles; Corndavon Lodge, $10\frac{1}{2}$; Loch Builg, $13\frac{1}{4}$. The distance from the beginning of the Glen Feardar road to Loch Builg may be reckoned at 9 or 10 miles.*

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*For further particulars about Glen Gairn reference may be made to “A Week-End in Glen Gairn,” by William Skea in *C.C.J.*, ii., 321; and “The Royal Dee,” by Alex. Inkson McConnochie, p. 82.