

## THREE DAYS ON BRAERIACH.

BY JAMES H. BELL.

WHAT follows is a short account of three separate expeditions over Braeriach from the Aviemore side, in the course of a visit to the Inverness-shire hills in the latter days of August 1918 by the writer, along with the Rev. R. P. Dansey. Perhaps one of the main incentives of our expedition was the investigation of the eternal snows of the Cairngorms, which, owing to the winter conditions in 1917-18, should have been very low indeed last September.

Our first day was mainly a walk of exploration. We left Aviemore about 8 a.m. and went along the timber railway up to Coylum Bridge, from where, by the track through the woods and near the stream, we soon reached the Cairngorm Club Bridge over the Allt na Beinne Moire. The weather soon gave us a foretaste of its behaviour for the rest of the week—mist at an altitude of 3000 feet or so and occasional drizzle. The next three wet hours were well employed in repairing the roof of a deserted bothy standing in the middle of a grassy lawn, just half a mile or so beyond the bridge. On later expeditions we slept here, and thus saved an hour and a half's morning walk, not to mention the other delays imposed by civilisation on the mountaineer. The afternoon being sunny and delightful, we proceeded up through the pine woods on the left side of the Làirig. By five p.m. we had gained the pools of Dee, when the character of the weather slowly changed, and wreaths of mist soon obliterated the windings of the Dee down the glen to the south. We slowly worked our way up the slopes on the right, but on reaching the col between Braeriach and Sron na Leirg the mist was so dense as to shroud all but a few boulders in a uniform white blur. By compass, we made for the direction of the foot of Loch Eunach, and soon came upon 200 feet or so of



broken granite crags, which we descended fairly easily, finding ourselves in the valley of the Allt na Beinne Beag. Following this stream for several miles downward, we reached the lower lochy in Glen Eunach after two hours of rain and mist. Soon after, the weather almost cleared and we had excellent views of the western ridges of Braeriach.

Next evening we walked up to the shieling at the foot of the Làirig and spent the night there in tolerable comfort, as it was calm and fuel was plentiful. About 3 a.m. the moon shone out of a fairly clear sky and the temperature was just below 44 degs. F. By 5 a.m. we were moving up the pass. The mist still lay on the slopes at a uniform height of 3000 feet, but to the north the sky was clear and in the east gave promise of a bright sunrise. We passed several groups of stags on the way—some of them were within a distance of 100 yards; they seemed fairly tame, but greeted us with frequent roaring, as if offended at our intrusion. At this season of the year we came across them everywhere—from the low-lying Rothiemurchus Forest to the summit plateaux of Braeriach and Ben Muich Dhui. Near the rocky barrier above the Pools of Dee the only sounds were the croak of ptarmigan from the cliffs of Creag na Leacainn, and the rush of the waterfall down the flanks of Ben Muich Dhui. The view to the north was fine and clear, ranging from Ben Wyvis and Ben Dearg to the dimmer and more distant hills of Sutherland, but from the south slowly crept up the inevitable mist, and Cairn Toul was almost invisible.

After a short halt for a meal, we gradually traversed the boulder-strewn slopes on the right until we got round into the Garbh Choire of Braeriach; then we followed the head waters of the Dee right up to the amphitheatre of crags, over which the stream dashes in a magnificent cascade, about 650 feet high. The scenery here is on a grand scale: in front are frowning precipices intersected by dark gullies, and in the centre the white



foamy line of the fall of the Dee. Above, the mist comes curling over the rim of the plateau into the corrie; around is a wide, flat space, sandy, or covered with huge granite boulders. Here and there the stream—which runs for the most part underground—appears in wide, sandy pools, in one of which I had a most refreshing dip, although the temperature was 42 degs. F. The summit plateau of Braeriach was reached by an interesting and not unexciting scramble up the slabby rocks on the left of the waterfall. A sort of chimney above the slabs gave an easy egress to the plateau by the rocks on its right side. I fancy that many quite good climbs could be got in this corrie, but the jointing of the granite affords rather few, and often badly-sloping hand-holds, though the texture of the rocks hereabouts is quite rough and firm. Following the stream about three-eighths of a mile from the precipice over the level, sandy, plateau, we came to the Wells of Dee; there quite a large volume of water comes welling up out of the red sand at a temperature of 40 degs. F. One is tempted to wonder where it comes from, as the altitude here is close on 4000 feet. We were now on an undulating plain, here boulder-strewn and there sandy, with occasional patches of scrubby grass and moss, while the more distant parts were ever and anon swallowed up in wreaths of mist, which blew along the western ridges from Glen Eunach. The effect of the shifting mist, the desolation, and the stillness, only broken by the subdued roar of the Dee waterfall and the twittering of a few small birds, possibly snow buntings, was very marked.

We gradually worked our way round the edge of the crags and over fairly bad ground till we gained the peak of Sgor na Lochan Uaine, noticing several snow patches in the Fuar Garbh Choire, the largest of which might be 250 square yards in area. On Sgor na Lochan Uaine the mist and a thin rain shut us in completely, so we resolved to give up all thoughts of Cairn Toul and return



to the summit of Braeriach. Though having this end in view, we neglected somehow to hug the precipice on our right, and as a result we almost descended one of the ridges towards the head of Loch Eunach. Just as we reached the summit cairn of Braeriach, the mist cleared for a short time from the plateau, though it remained scething up and down over the corries, being always blown back on ascending, by the slight westerly breeze. Under these conditions, the view from the summit into the eastern abyss is unequalled. Now and then fantastic granite pinnacles come into view; thin spires, rearing themselves out of a bottomless sea of mist, into which slope—almost perpendicularly—great, smooth, rocky slabs, at places intersected by even steeper gullies. A long traverse round the slopes of Sron na Leirg below Corrie Ruadh, brought us back to the Pools of Dee by 5.30 p.m. During the long descent to Aviemore the sun came out in a sky of beautiful cirro-macula, and in the valley the heather was quite dry, thus showing the mist and rain to be a specialty of the higher Cairngorms.

After one day's rest we spent the next over Ben Muich Dhui and Cairngorm, and that night I found myself again in the old shieling—alone on this occasion—as I had resolved to explore the corrie and crags immediately beneath the summit of Braeriach. Though I had a double supply of heather for my couch, the night was far from pleasant, as a violent wind arose towards midnight. The absence of door, window, and one-half of the roof gave rapid variations between cold breezes and stifling smoke, and one dozed off and rekindled the fire alternately until dawn. About 3.30 a.m. I strolled out to look at the weather. The scene was one of wild beauty and grandeur. A crescent moon hung in the eastern sky close to Venus, while above and below were fleecy alto-cumulus clouds, studded here and there with a few stars. The mist lay over the ramparts of the Làirig at its usual level, while Castle Hill and Carn Elrick stood clear over the tops of the pine forest, which



cast waving shadows on the ripples of the Làirig burn. Five minutes later the moon was robed in an iridescent corona and the hill slopes became darker, but soon the stormy wind had again cleared the sky.

By 4.45 a.m. I was off, and by 8 a.m. I had reached a point on the slopes above the Pools of Dee. A steep but easy climb took me to the topmost slopes of Sron na Leirg, where an icy hurricane was blowing. Soon I had crossed the col and reached the top of a scree slope, which I descended into Corrie Bhrochain. The mist was almost as bad as it had been two days before, but more mobile. Ben Muich Dhui was always clear and Cairn Toul as persistently clouded, though Lochan Uaine, perched in its crater-like hollow, was nearly always visible. Corrie Bhrochain had no snow in it whatever, and I could now admire from below the stupendous dark chimneys and buttresses beneath the summit of Braeriach. Even in this sheltered corrie the wind was very fierce, so I contented myself with a scramble up a gully of moderate steepness to a point quite near the summit. On the summit the wind seemed to blow in tornado-like gusts over small areas—here a dead calm, and a few yards away a hurricane. The rain was now exchanged for sleet, with some hail and snow. From above, the granite pinnacles seem to be scarcely 2 feet thick and from 20 to 30 feet high. In good weather, I should imagine these crags would present more features of interest to the rock-climber than any others in the Cairngorms. Soon I was glad to make my way over the steep, but broken crags to the shores of Corrie Lochan. Seen from above, the waters of this loch have a beautiful bluish-green hue, even more striking than that of Glaslyn on Snowdon. Lochan Uaine on Cairn Toul also shows this; but, in contrast to these, the Pools of Dee are of a sinister slaty blue. In the case of Glaslyn, the explanation seems to lie in the copper salts in the slate rock, but here the rock is identical in all three cases—red granite. As Corrie



Lochan seems very deep and Lochan Uaine may also be so, the colour is perhaps due to micro-organisms distributed throughout the water—of a very arctic habitat.

From Corrie Lochan an easy walk brought me to the foot of Loch Eunach, with good views of the buttresses and gullies of Sgoran Dubh. The later part of the afternoon was, as usual, sunny in the valley. After a pleasant rest in the warm fragrance of the fir trees, I reached Aviemore in the evening. Next day, the mist cleared for a minute or two off the hills, and showed Braeriach white, with a sprinkling of new snow, as if consoling one by the reflection that bad weather in the Cairngorms is not altogether an accident.

#### MOUNTAIN-CLIMBING.

Dared and done : at last I stand upon the summit, Dear and True!  
 Singly dared and done ; the climbing both of us were bound to do.  
 Petty feat and yet prodigious ; every side my glance was bent  
 O'er the grandeur and the beauty lavished through the whole ascent.  
 Ledge by ledge, out broke new marvels, now minute and now immense :  
 Earth's most exquisite disclosure, heaven's own God in evidence !  
 And no berry in its hiding, no blue space in its outspread,  
 Pleaded to escape my footstep, challenged my emerging head,  
 As I climbed or paused from climbing, now o'er-branched by shrub  
 and tree,  
 Now built round by rock and boulder, now at just a turn set free,  
 Stationed face to face with—Nature? rather with Infinitude.

ROBERT BROWNING.

—“ La Saisiaz.”



*Photo by*

ALLTDRUE—LOOKING TOWARDS THE LAIRIG DHRU.

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