

FROM GARBHCHOIRE TO GLENCOE :
THE SNOW-BEDS IN THE CAIRNGORMS.

BY JAMES H. BELL.

I SPENT a few days in the Cairngorm region in July, with a view to securing some presentable photographs of the grand rock scenery of the Garbhchoire and other parts of the Braeriach-Cairntoul amphitheatre. In this, however, I was completely baffled by the ubiquitous and watchful mist, which prevented any more than two expeditions during six days' camping residence with a friend at Alltduie. The seventh morning was brilliant and afforded a perfect view—from the train at Aviemore!—of all the tops, with the conspicuous snow-field above Corrie Lochan. The treachery of the weather on the two occasions on which we ventured among the high hills was all of a piece with the above behaviour. Still, all the varied and unpleasant forms of atmospheric moisture can hardly efface the charm of these hills—especially the retrospective charm.

We reached Coylum Bridge about 9 p.m. on Thursday, July 8th. There we left a motor cycle and side car with the most of our goods and proceeded to Alltduie with a light weight tent and the merest necessaries. The idea was to settle the Garbhchoire amphitheatre in one day and proceed farther north. We started well next day, with a fresh morning sun shimmering on the Làirig burn as we ascended through the pine forest. All went well till second breakfast on the slopes above the Pools of Dee. There was a fairly large patch of snow on the screes above there, and the pleasures of being photographed in extreme peril on an Alpine ice slope with a walking-stick, and, later, of experimenting on the coefficient of friction on snow slopes, of boulders of

different shapes and sizes, did away with perhaps the only clear hour we had. It was certainly ominously dark and misty on the summit ridge of Braeriach half an hour later. In fact, the conditions were so uninspiring that we forgot the Garbhchoire and became absorbed in the erratic movements of a ptarmigan hen, anxiously hopping round the screes near us with drooping wing. After a short search, my friend located and captured the chick, and the last few moments' grace before the storm burst on us was occupied in photographing him after posing him in a niche between two boulders. Then we fled to the summit cairn. No use! In most parts of the world the wind comes from some particular quarter. On Braeriach it comes from all quarters at once. We fled down the ridge towards Sron na Leirg in a driving, freezing rain—large drops cutting into our faces like a sandblast. It faired up as we descended to the Làirig, and we dried our soaked garments in a blazing sun on Allt druie meadow.

We did not leave next day as our means of transport failed us, but it took five days for another promising morning to appear. It is a truism that everyone gets up at, or before, sunrise in a tent. On my first visit to Allt druie I breakfasted at 4 a.m. Last year (1920), we started at 6 a.m., but fell off to 9 a.m. for this second expedition. The weather was fine and enjoyable; I started off alone, but I was not sanguine. After all, it might collapse at any time, and there was clearly no occasion for hurry. So I smoked a contemplative pipe behind the moraines just above the tree limit on the Làirig. A lady passed me in full hill-tramping kit. Later, I joined her, and we proceeded together to the Pools of Dee. She was walking alone from Coylum Bridge to Braemar—a thing which would require some consideration—and still more tobacco—for me to undertake. I have often tried to blame this circumstance for the day's weather experiences in the Garbhchoire and my failure to secure photographs, but it will not do, as I had intended to start at 4 a.m. In any case, the

weather probably favoured the lady—at least, as far as Derry Lodge—whilst it was engaged in fogging up the Garbhchoire and Braeriach plateau. Meanwhile, I sloped upwards to the right to short-cut into the corrie—my second error of thoughtless indecision, since two years before I wasted much energy and many words on these same abominable screes. It should be possible to traverse from the Pools of Dee at the 3000 feet level into the Fuar Garbhchoire, but the self-control and labour expended would be colossal over these interminable screes of huge, rocking, granitic blocks. The two sane routes are either to slope up to the Braeriach summit ridge before the Pools of Dee or to descend farther to the junction of the stream from the Pools with the Garbhchoire burn or headwaters of the Dee. In the end, I made a rough descent to this stream down the steep screes, and followed it up.

Here the mist came curling down, and when I entered the Fuar Garbhchoire the Dee waterfall was lost in a white blur. In fact, it became so thick soon that nothing was visible but the snow-field, which almost filled the Corrie. One could certainly walk over snow for at least a quarter of a mile up here. The stream was, for long stretches, buried, and elsewhere showed fine caverns and snow bridges. A photograph I took then is rather suggestive, on a small scale, of a view I have seen of the seaward termination of an Alaskan glacier. However, I was still after a shot at the waterfall, and climbed up the rocks on the right side (facing). I had a splendid scramble up the 650 feet of granite cliff—but only ghostly and misty photographs. At the top, just beneath the rim of the plateau, there were some fine cornice effects. On the plateau, ten yards was the limit visibility, and I was glad of a minute pocket compass. I set my course north-west and wandered on for five minutes before consulting it again, when, to my surprise, I found myself on the edge of nothingness and going due south-east. Nothing for it but to climb up the ridge again, re-directing myself every minute. In a few minutes

I was again descending over sandy scree. On the way I surprised no fewer than three broods of ptarmigan, the hens croaking and circling about in the usual broken-winged fashion, but with small need for concealment, as about a score of fluffy, little, greenish-yellow chicks were cheeping and hopping about. They were fairly tame, pretty, little birds, and did not seem to mind the heavy rain and cheerless neighbourhood in the least. Five minutes later and I suddenly descended beneath the mist cap. There was the end of Loch Eunach, the winding stream down the glen, the shooting road, and the buttresses of Sgoran Dubh. I believe I should really have reached Alltdruie dry on this occasion, so warm was it in the valley, but for a *faux pas* on a mossy stone while crossing the Allt na Beinne burn.

It may be of interest to mention some other localities where snow-fields were in evidence in the days that followed. In the Cairngorms there was a large drift above Corrie Lochan on Braeriach, with several smaller drifts in some other western corries. In the Làirig were] one or two small drifts on the Sron na Leirg slopes, and a quite respectable bed on Ben Muich Dhui, above the waterfall over the Pools of Dee. About the lowest altitude snowbed we saw, however, was a short distance south of the summit of Wade's old road over Corrieyaraick—only about 2500 feet altitude, and exposed to north-west winds.

Wade's old road from Speyside, over Corrieyaraick, to Fort Augustus well repays a visit. It is really only the lower slopes which are in bad condition and serve as water courses, enforcing a "general wade." The view from the summit is magnificent, and is dramatically revealed to a traveller from Speyside. To the north-west the Sisters of Kintail and the other Glen Shiel peaks are most conspicuous. The bottom of the rift of the Caledonian Canal is not visible from here, but the deep, wooded Glen Tarff winds downward towards it, apparently at one's feet. There was no snow visible on any of the north-western peaks, but a little farther on a

glimpse across a gap in the hills to the south-west showed patches of white on the Ben Nevis group. A few days later we crossed the Mamores from the bend of Glen Nevis to Kinloch-leven by a col to the west of Stob Ban. The day was thick and occasionally wet, but there seemed to be no snow lying in any of the likely corries of the Mamores.

Our last climbing ground was Glencoe. The weather sustained its reputation to the last with a half-hour's blizzard on the summit of Sgor na Fionnaidh after a misty traverse of the Aonach Eagach ridge. Curiously enough, the mist did not descend till a full twenty minutes after we reached the ridge, thus affording excellent views from Ben Nevis and the Mamores, round to Ben Alder and Schiehallion. There was very little snow in Glencoe—only a few small patches in the upper corries of Bidean nan Bian. We had one other pleasant day—up to Ossian's Cave, over the top of Aonach Dubh and along the ridge to Stob Coire an Lochan. Ossian's Cave and Ossian's Ladder were very wet, but not until we topped our final peak did the storm get to work in earnest. Luckily, we struck easy screes into Corrie nam Beith. There seemed to be no snow in the eastern corries of Stob Coire an Lochan. These eastern crags have wonderful, slender pinnacles, and the rocks are so sheer as to allow of a stone dropping down over 1000 feet before reaching earth—truly, an admirable place for experiments with a parachute!

The corries held far more snow last year (1920) than they did in either of the previous two years. In late August, 1918, the Cairngorm snows were confined on the Braeriach side to a few insignificant patches in the upper main Garbhchoire with none in the other corries. In 1919 I did not visit the Cairngorms, but in early July there was still some snow on Ben More and Ben Lui, a few small patches in the upper corries of Bidean and Stob Coire an Lochan, and a fair amount on Ben Nevis. Of course, a visit in early September shows the snow at its yearly minimum, but I fancy little impression would

have been made last year on the beds of the Fuar Garbhchoire. A photograph I received later, taken in early July last year from Glen Dee below Cairn Toul, shows vast snows as well, in the Choiré Bhrochain of Braeriach, which was clear in 1918.

Besides the charm of their arctic corries and plateaux, I think the Cairngorms have more self-contained individuality and vastness than any Scottish mountain group. Especially is this the case with the wild and remote, rocky "cirque" from Braeriach to Cairn Toul, which I have not yet visited nearly as often as I would like to; and even then I do not expect to exhaust its variety and charm. Allt druie is an admirable base camp, and this fine open meadow, circled by glorious pine forest, with the rippling burn and the majestic imminence of the outposts of the Làirig—Carn Elrick and Creag na Leacainn—is varied enough to fill many an off-day with contented idleness.