



THE LARIG GHRU FROM CARN A' MHAIM.

I. M. Pittendrigh

THE INNER CIRCLE OF THE CAIRNGORMS.

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WHEN Alexander of Macedon seated himself upon a stone to lament that there were no more worlds to conquer, he demonstrated the littleness of the field which lies upon to the soldier conqueror. For the mountaineer conqueror the situation is happily different. The world will always have its array of virgin peaks to challenge the courage of the adventurous, but even for the less adventurous, to whom the Himalayas and Rockies must remain more or less remote dreams, the mountains of Scotland offer a field which is not likely to satiate them. Even, to come nearer home, to one who is really in love with them the Cairngorms always offer a field for fresh conquest. Certainly I should feel very disappointed if after a month's holiday in Braemar, I were to come home without having struck something new. The particular new conquest last year, which afforded me most pleasure, was that of the "inner circle of the Cairngorms", in as much as it was the means of laying what had long been a mountaineering bogey.

I have a friend who, whenever he thinks I am unduly lethargic, deems it to be his duty to urge me to climb. His energy in this, although he no longer climbs himself, has not diminished a whit with the passage of the years. One of the proudest achievements of his own mountaineering days was the walk which he has christened "the inner circle of the Cairngorms", and for long he has urged that I should follow in his foot-

steps. I never used to discuss with him plans for mountaineering expeditions without his reverting to this topic. He always used to tell me that when I had done this particular walk then I might pride myself on being a walker almost equal in prowess to himself. Nor were hints lacking that I "funked" attempting it. Somehow something always seemed to prevent the challenge being taken up. Meanwhile, the longer the walk was delayed, the more numerous became his taunts on the subject, and the heavier did it weigh on my mountaineering conscience. Definitely I resolved that last summer the thing must be done. And now it has been. I went, I saw, and I conquered, and the recollection of a very precious day upon the hills has become one of my cherished mountaineering memories.

The route of my friend's walk proceeds from Derry Lodge to Carn a' Mhaim, thence to Ben Macdhuì, thence to Beinn Mheadhoin, thence to Beinn a' Chaorruinn, thence to Beinn Bhreac, and so back to Derry Lodge. It is possible of course to make an infinite variety of outer and inner circles on the Cairngorms and to boast of record distances covered in record times. Such is far from being my purpose. I do not claim that "the inner circle of the Cairngorms" is anything in the nature of a pedestrian feat. It involves a walk of some twenty miles and some six thousand feet of climbing, which may, (comparatively speaking) be a trifling day's work. It is a round, however, quite worthy of general notice on account of various intrinsic attractions, the interest of the climbs, the variety of the scenery, and of the views afforded into the inner recesses of the Cairngorms. These are attractions which the walk offers to every lover of the hills, while to me it has the great additional attraction that I can now meet my friend without a blush!

To essay this conquest a band of six heroes and one heroine left Braemar on the morning of August 26. We were lucky in our numbers and lucky in our day. Derry Lodge was reached at the propitious hour of nine

o'clock. The sun was up and shining. There was a merry sparkle in the waters of the Lui, while the hills had the far away look of enticement which generally heralds golden days upon them. Truly God in His heaven and all right in our world at any rate! We were not spared minor misfortunes however. One of the company had brought a bottle of the concoction called Kia-Ora, the cork of which had become unloosened in his knapsack, with the result that his sandwiches and other articles had become saturated with the liquid. Fortunately another member of the party who had come armed with liquid of a more potent nature had fastened his cork more carefully. Disaster there had been disaster indeed!

Having left our car we set forth for our first objective. That of course was the summit of Carn Mhaim, the journey thereto being made by the usual route along the path towards the Larig. Leaving this path half-a-mile beyond the bridge over the Lui, we proceeded to strike upwards. We were in no hurry and allowed ourselves abundance of time to enjoy the beauties of the morning. Halts were not infrequent when we could sit down, gaze into heaven, and cheerfully damn all whose opinions were not coincident with our own. The worries of life easily slide into small perspective on such occasions. If only the lotus could always be so easily grasped! The only real worry I had was the slow response of my pocket aneroid in recording the height which subjectively we appeared to have attained. I would gladly have dashed it against a rock when, on drawing it forth, perspiring the while, I found it recorded only a little over 2000 feet. We had to climb to 3300 feet and there is no means of cheating nature. However, *per ardua ad astra!* With much toil we resumed our way till presently we reached the top of Carn Mhaim at 11.15, our first summit of the day.

No top in the Cairngorms affords finer simultaneous views of Ben Macdhuì, Cairn Toul and the wild grandeur of the Larig Pass flanked at the back by

the corries of Braeriach. All was clear this morning which was remarkable considering August's record and the fact that Jonah was with us. Jonah was the heroine, whom I have already mentioned. I give her this appellation because previous to this walk she had climbed Ben Macdhui thirteen times and twelve times she had climbed it in a mist. Only on the thirteenth time had it been clear, thus refuting one popular superstition, and also showing how much more energetic Jonah was than Bruce's spider.

From the top of Carn a' Mhaim we proceeded along the narrow ridge to Ben Macdhui, the high level route to that hill as it is called. Here we obtained an excellent view of an eagle which flew out from one of the gullies below us. It was rich brown in colour and soared off in magnificent style towards the Devil's Point. We proceeded up Ben Macdhui, over the boulders along the side of the Taillear's Burn, at the highest point of which we sat down to have lunch. At this stage catastrophe seemed to loom nigh. Clouds came stealing up from the south. The top of Cairn Toul was suddenly obscured. Then a brush of mist swept over us on Ben Macdhui. Of course we all blamed Jonah and wondered what would be the most acceptable way of offering her up as a sacrifice to propitiate Ferlah Mhor, the familiar spirit of the mountain! But this time the gods were kind. When we reached the cairn at 1.30 it was once more clear.

Despite the clearness in the immediate vicinity the distant horizon was hazy. It was clearly not a day for the enjoyment of long distant views, but, although that is certainly one of the rewards of one's toil, I have never regarded it as the main reason for climbing hills. It is impossible to describe one's spiritual reaction to mountaineering in exact scientific psychological terms, but, to talk vaguely and unscientifically, I regard it as soaking one's whole being in the spirit of the mountains. Hence even a climb in mist may be quite productive of satisfaction, even apart from the

opportunity it offers of enjoying beautiful vignettes through unexpected openings in the clouds.

The summit of Ben Macdhui we left at two o'clock. The inspirer of the journey had laid particular stress upon the fact that we had to proceed in a straight line from the top of Ben Macdhui to the top of Beinn Mheadhoin no easy deviation by the Ben Macdhui path being permitted. This is not strictly possible as a straight surface line between the two tops would go through the middle of Loch Etchachan. We approximated to perfection, however, by making in a straight line for the north end of the loch. The journey lies across boulders but is not steep until just above Loch Etchachan. Here the scene is one of supreme charm. "Stridency and clamour are forgotten in the ancient stillness." To-day the beautiful sheet of water lay before us still and serene, scarcely a ripple disturbing its profound blue. On all sides crags and cliffs kept their ancient sentinel watch.

We disported ourselves by loosening huge boulders and sending these spinning down the steep incline into the loch. For that amusement I offer no apology. It is one of the pleasantest ways imaginable of passing the time, and if the way be clear, unlike most sports, it hurts nobody. Those who criticise it as a silly amusement should listen to these wise words of Sir Leslie Stephen—"The amusement characteristic of the genuine mountaineer consists in rolling big stones down a cliff to dash themselves to pieces at its foot. No one who cannot contentedly spend hours in that fascinating, though simple, sport really loves a mountain." Ruskin also adds his tribute in one of his letters. He says, "I spent an hour pleasantly enough throwing stones with Couttet at the great icicles in the ravine. It had all the delight of being allowed to throw stones in the vastest glass and china shop that ever was established".

If time had allowed we might well have spent the whole afternoon beside Loch Etchachan and sauntered

down to Derry in the cool of the evening. But other tasks remained to be done. Before continuing on to Beinn Mheadhoin we saw at the far side of the loch two figures bathing. One of our company had field glasses through which he inspected them, but he would not allow the rest of us to do so as he said the spectacle was too Grecian !

The ascent of Beinn Mheadhoin from Loch Etchachan is a mere bagatelle compared with our previous ascents. The top plateau was quickly reached and here we were delighted with a second close view of an eagle. I always regret that I have never been close enough to an eagle to see its beak ! It is always the great expanse of its wings which takes the eye. The highest point of the highest tor was reached at four o'clock and here we sat down to debate how we were going to proceed. On the far side of the Larig an Laoigh Pass appeared Beinn a' Chaorruinn, our next objective, but before gaining the top of it we had to drop sixteen hundred feet into the Pass and then climb thirteen hundred feet on the other side. On paper that may not sound impressive, but, after what had already been a fair day's walk, it gives one pause to think. As a matter of fact thinking was idle, because, after one has made up one's mind to go down into the Larig an Laoigh from Beinn Mheadhoin, all roads there are equally rough. Great play is made by Bunyan of the hardships encountered by Christian in climbing Hill Difficulty, but the hardships, if there were any, of the descent are passed over in silence. Certainly no bodily exercise is more irksome than a prolonged steep descent over rough ground, as Bunyan might have known if he had not lived in a flat country. We now had a surfeit of this scrambling down as best as we could over rocks, grass, heather, bogs and burns. The valley at last being reached, we decided that it was time to have "tea". Accordingly a welcome half-hour was spent by the burn side before girding up our loins for the ascent of Beinn a' Chaorruinn. The climb here is sharp and precipitous, but we

decided that the best thing to do was to face it boldly. So without making any detours to lessen the incline, we "speeled" right up the face of the hill. It only took us about half-an-hour to reach the top, the cairn being reached at six o'clock. The evening was very fine. We had a sharp shower after leaving Beinn Mheadhoin and the level of the clouds was now considerably lower, deep banks of mist concealing the higher tops of the Cairngorms. Yet the gradations of light and colour were extremely lovely. If the Cairngorms appeared to frown, some of the more distant hills stood out startlingly clear and blue. Nearer at hand stretched miles of desolate moorland, brown with black scars, "evolving a thing majestic without severity, impressive without showiness, emphatic in its admonitions, grand in its simplicity."

After a brief respite we set forward towards our last top, Beinn Bhreac. About three miles of moor and bog separate the two tops, but there is little fresh climbing. We had been warned that the going here was very bad, my friend having drawn a picture of the miles of peat hags that had to be encountered. It hardly turned out, however, to be the slough of despond that we had been led to believe it was. At any rate we managed to steer a successful course between the bogs. Not very far from the top of Beinn a' Chaorruinn we came upon a rain gauge. It is rather surprising the tracks of civilization that one sometimes finds on the high hills. Two days before in climbing Beinn a' Ghlo we had been surprised to see a weather-cock stuck up on top of one of the hills on the other side of Glen Tilt. I do not know who comes to measure the rainfall on Beinn a' Chaorruinn but a considerable amount of rainwater had collected inside it. The top of Beinn Bhreac was reached at 7.40, the climbing part of the day now being at an end. The rest of the walk was easy, and we joyfully made our way down the gradual slope to Derry Lodge. We had achieved what we had set out to do and it

was with feelings of triumph that we set our faces towards home !

Some amusement was caused at this late stage by my mistaking a grouse for a frog ! Success had apparently gone to my head. I shouted to someone to come and inspect a huge frog, when suddenly it took wings and flew up into the air. Naturally I was accused of having partaken of the potent liquid erstwhile referred to—which incidentally had been invisible all day—so that the allegation was entirely without truth. It is curious none the less how one's senses cheat one at times ! On reaching the Derry Burn we did not waste time searching for an easy place to ford it, but boldly entered the water where we happened to reach it. This is the time of day when one begins to feel curiously light-hearted. Dusk falls more softly than usual, the aroma of tobacco is more delightful, and, to proceed from the general to the particular, the "inner circle of the Cairngorms" was a *fait accompli*. There would be no more reproaches, no more taunts, no more subtle innuendoes !

Darkness fell as under the giant trees of the Derry Forest we finished our walk. Few things are more pleasant than the perfect harmony between mind and body on such occasions as these—a sense of physical weariness accompanying a deep spiritual repose, on which no jarring notes intrude. External nature too seems to be at one with the human spirit. The fever and the fret have been forgotten, and, if to-morrow the road is again dusty, we have at least lingered for a time in pleasant places.