

A NEW APPROACH TO THE CAIRNGORMS.

BY WILLIAM GARDEN.

I HAVE no doubt that, in this year of grace, 1929, every mountaineer on reading the title of this paper will say to himself "Impossible! Have not the Cairngorms been attacked, and conquered, from every point of the compass?" I have, however, been unable to find that the expedition, of which I am now to attempt an account, has ever been done before or since, but I may say at once that that was not the reason which induced us to do it.

We have only to take the most casual glance at an ordinary School Map of Scotland to observe that the County of Banff may quite well be described as a long tongue of land, the root of which starts on the north east coast, and the tip of which extends to the summit of Ben Macdhui. That part of the County where the Water of Caiplich has its source, and subsequently flows north-eastwards under the name of the Water of Ailnack to join the Avon, and thereafter the rapid-running Spey, is a land almost entirely unknown to the pedestrian to-day, and the reason is not far to seek, for, prior to the advent of the motor-car, it was probably one of the most inaccessible and out-of-the-way parts of Scotland. But the order of things has changed; and, by means of a car, one can explore this lonely and unfrequented district in a day from Aberdeen, though it has to be admitted it is an eighteen hour day, and a fairly strenuous one at that.



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THE GORGE OF THE AILNACK.
LOOKING NORTH AND SHOWING THE CASTLE.

J. A. Parker

My friends Parker and the brothers Robb made up the party, along with an experienced driver to take the car from Tomintoul to Derry Lodge to pick us up there in the evening. An early start was essential, so we left Aberdeen at 6 prompt on the morning of Sunday, 10th August, 1919. The Robbs' "Sunbeam" is a trusted friend, for by means of it had we not already made two very successful one-day forced marches from town—one to Beinn a' Ghlo, and another through the Larig Ghru? Once again, on its wings, we sped up Strath Don, and over the Lecht, passing through woodlands and by hill-sides, all canopied by a blue known only to, and appreciated by, the early riser on a perfect summer's morn. Tomintoul was reached at 9; and by arrangement a substantial breakfast was got through with avidity at the Richmond Arms. For reasons, not altogether unselfish, we wished our driver friend a safe journey across the ups and downs he had to face before reaching the Dee valley; and at 9.45 we descended into Strath Avon by the Inchroy road. We crossed the Avon by a fine iron bridge just before its junction with the Ailnack, and we then proceeded to walk along the true left bank of that stream, over pleasant haugh-lands, to the farm of Delnabo. We had all heard of the Ailnack gorge, but our expectations were certainly quite surpassed. As we walked westwards the scene was one of extreme beauty. About a mile and a half south-west of Delnabo, the stream has cut its way by an extraordinary process of erosion through a very deep ravine between the steep slopes of Carn Meadhonach, on the north, and Druim na h-Easgainn, on the south. So steep is the north slope that we were at times forced high up above the Ailnack in order to make progress, but we fortunately struck a rather ill-defined path leading to a small tarn, named Lochan Uaine, which made the task less troublesome than it would otherwise have been, for here the heather is deep and the slope very steep, which made the going laborious. By this time the sun was

making himself felt on those southern slopes, and the tempting pools in the Ailnack, far beneath, raised visions of a bathe, but it was out of the question, for there was a long day's walk ahead.

It should be explained that the Ailnack, from this point, passes through a series of gates or gorges, and that probably the finest of these is the southmost one, which is formed by the slopes of the Geal Chàrn on the west side and Càrn na Ruabraich on the east. There is a large belt of limestone in the neighbourhood, which is occasionally interrupted by the Old Red Sandstone outlier, which appears again in the Ailnack gorge, where its intercalation and folding with the black schists is beautifully exposed.

Having passed through the southmost gorge, we find ourselves standing on the steep southern slopes of the Geal Chàrn (2,484 ft.), just beyond the point marked "The Castle" on the 1 in. map, which is a well-defined pinnacle, standing out from the west face of the gorge, and which is well seen on the photograph illustrating this article. Geologists tell us that here there is one of the most striking instances of stream capture in the Cairngorms, and that the Caiplich once flowed on eastwards down the valley of the Loin to join the Avon near Inchrory, until the Ailnack captured it, and diverted its waters to the north. The situation is an extraordinarily interesting one, as the river, in changing its course, turns almost three quarters of a circle. Here we are suddenly ushered on to the edge of an enormous plateau of open land, extending from the Nethy watershed on the north, right to the Avon valley on the south. This great plateau is probably at an average level of not less than 2,000 feet, and extends in a series of billowy, undulating moor-lands on all sides as far as the eye can reach, and would in bad weather be a very severe test of good steering, even to an experienced hand with a good compass. In fact, it resembles a boundless ocean of hollows and humps, and, once down among these, the only guides

to direction are the very far distant tops of the eastern Cairngorms. But to-day what a spectacle awaits us! Away to the S.W. stands Ben Bynack, broadside on, and not assuming his well-known cone shape, as seen from the familiar view-points around Nethy Bridge. Behind him, and to the left, the slopes of A'Chòinneach, and again beyond, the majestic grandeur of the eastern face of Cairn Gorm, with the deep depression where lies the dark Loch Avon. Still further to the left, the massive Macdhuì, on whose slopes the familiar white patches are loath to depart, reminding us of superiority in height and of many joyous days spent on his wintry sides. But what of the novelty of the vision to the south? Here we have almost unrecognisable views across the Avon valley of Ben Avon and Beinn a' Bhuid. So unusual and unexpected were these views that, even to old stagers like ourselves, they almost made us say "What hills are those?" Here we had a "reversed" view of the ever-familiar "Sneck," and of Parker's famous Stob an t-Sluichd, standing out in all its ruggedness on the north slope of Beinn a' Bhuid, and evidently well deserving of all the climbing possibilities which he has claimed for it. We are indeed in a new and wonderful country, which reminded me much of the foot-hills to the east of the Rockies.

From this vantage ground, however, it was obvious that we must get down, and cross to the right bank of the river, which here bends westward. Here there was a slight difference of opinion as to the best route to Dagrù, our next objective, and one member of the party elected to walk up the grassy banks of the river to the Feith Buidhe and thence on to the beginning of the Dagrù ridge. The other three, who were evidently fond of heather stepping, climbed up the heather bank on the south side of the river and ultimately reached the summit of Carn na Feannaige, from which coign of vantage communication was established with the other section of the party, now

1½ miles distant, after having been out of sight from each other for the best part of an hour.

The re-union was celebrated by a luncheon, after which it was a pleasant two miles' walk to the top of Dagrug (2,770 ft.), which is the lower or N.E. top of Creag Mhor (2,932 ft.). On the main top there are some very fine pot holes worn into the granite rocks. And we halted for some little time to examine them and also to admire the view. From here the great Barns of Bynack stand out most prominently, and a splendid prospect is to be had of the whole of the steep south side of Cairn Gorm and Beinn Mheadhoin, with the silver thread of the Feith Buidhe tumbling down over its rocky slabs into the far end of Loch Avon. An easy and restful descent brought us now to the Avon, and as we drank of its soft clear water we thought of what Aberdeen had been deprived through unfortunate partisanship, and inability to look far enough into the future.

The Avon crossed, the well-known Larig an Laoigh route is joined, about which it would be superfluous to say anything to the readers of the *Cairngorm Club Journal*. Be it enough to say that we were not sorry when the last supreme effort of the day was completed by surmounting the grind up from the Dubh Lochan, and when familiar scenes, and countless happy memories associated with them, came before us, as we journeyed down the long trail of the Glen of Derry. The evening sun was now casting lengthening shadows on the hill-sides, the fleecy clouds were assuming a roseate tinge, as they floated peacefully over a sea of exquisite turquoise blue, and now we are among the tall gaunt forms of the pines—old and gnarled—we know so well, standing out—solemn sentinels—to remind us, as if we needed reminding, that we were now approaching the home of our old friend, Donald Fraser—long since passed over—who ever used to hail us with a word of cheer, and that however cheerless either the elements, or ourselves might happen to be. We were at Derry

Lodge of course, and it was just 7.45. The "Sunbeam," a gladsome sight, was there all safe and sound. A rapid partial change and we were all on board, and very shortly afterwards we were seated at a very square meal, c/o Maggie Gruer, Thistle Cottage, Inverey. The records do not state when the party left Inverey, but, if I mistake not, it would not have been much before 9.45, and I do know that we reached the Granite City just before "Victoria" chimed midnight. A great day—twenty-one miles on foot, and I leave the motor enthusiasts to work out the rest.