

CAIRNGORM AND BRAERIACH.

BY JOHN CLARKE.

CAIRNGORM, the Blue Cairn (4,048 ft.), can never be without interest, if only sentimental, to members of a Club that has chosen for title its name. Though the least elevated of the group of giants in which the Grampians culminate, it has also given a distinctive appellation to the central massif of Scotland, and little apology is, therefore, necessary for reverting to what may be for many a thrice told tale. Spending a couple of weeks in the summer of 1932 at Boat of Garten in the very attractive and comfortable quarters of Craigard, one could scarcely fail to hear the call of the hills. At early dawn, before the world was awake, there was the Larig Ghru to greet the eye, with the challenge of Braeriach close by, and then across Glen Einich, a little to the west, the imposing Sgor an Dhu; while from other and more erect viewpoints Cairngorm itself came into view and on its right the Lurcher's Crag, and the long slope of the north end of Ben Macdhui, which has gained such a painful interest through the fatal accident that recently occurred on it: in the background of the slope the top is roughly just discernible.

Broken weather, lack of training, and a somewhat crippling attack of rheumatism delayed any ambitious schemes of climbing. An afternoon crawl to Loch Vaa, that charming crystal vase set in emerald, was the limit of power, while a high wind and an unyielding back rendered even golf a severe penance, not to say a pitiable fiasco. But patience had its reward, when at the end of ten days, Saturday, August 6, seemed sufficiently assured of weather prospects to warrant nearer acquaintance with the high tops. The Sluggan had not yet been closed, as had shortly afterwards to be done at the behest of the shooting tenant, and the car permit kindly granted by the Forestry Commission still ran. Transport to Loch Morlich presented no problem and my son and I were on the road in good time.

The ascent of Cairngorm is a comparatively simple matter from the north side, and indeed from a distance the mountain looks to childish eyes so plain and smooth that a very young person's suggestion on one occasion was to walk up and slide down! The route is too well known to call for any long description. A well marked path leads from the carriage road at Loch Morlich across the meadows and by the right bank of the Allt Mor on to the side of the hill. This "big burn" with its feeders, it may be noted, drains the north side of the mountain. After clearing the first of the outlying buttresses of the mountain you may pretty well choose your own way to the top. But if there is mist, careful compass bearings will be necessary. On this occasion the climb was almost without incident, though not without one or two features. The wind was violent and fierce, almost beyond precedent, the more surprising as ground conditions and outlook gave no reason to anticipate it. It swept over from the west or south-west with absolute fury, and with what would have seemed in a human agent, positive malevolence. From 2,500 feet and upwards it shrieked and tore across the mountain side with resistless force, rendering necessary a series of tacks on alternately short and long legs—and eventually on very tired ones! Without the aid of a stalwart companion to shoulder the bulk of the impedimenta, a senior in not too good condition might have been pardoned for declining to struggle on to the top. The gale was the worst but one ever experienced during a very long course of years and varied adventures on the summits.

There is an obvious moral, especially for the novice: be prepared for emergencies; you never can tell what unforeseen contingencies may be in store. The old copy-book heading—perhaps still current—"High winds blow on high hills" under its verbal play contains a solid truth. The increasing violence is graduated up to the peak of Everest itself, where an aeroplane is tossed about like a cork in a 120-200 m.p.h. hurricane. The wind blows where and as it lists, unforeseeable, incalculable, irresistible. The storm of a midsummer day enables one only faintly to picture

what it was in midwinter, two years ago, when the ill advised attempt to cross the top from Loch Avon ended in disaster.

Mist had hung round the summits all morning, and it was scarce matter of wonder that at the top there was neither view nor shelter. The direction of the wind offered no hope of immediate improvement. All that could be done was without delay to seek the shelter and the comfort of the Marquis's well. Here, toward the lee side of the mountain, the attack of the storm was much less direct. Moderate shelter and a substantial repast—the decent interment of the remains not forgotten—restored vigour. With back toward the mountain the "toil of the oar" is over, and, the gale now on the port quarter, full sail can be set. The wind somewhat subsided as we got below its main fury. Deviating somewhat toward the right or east side of the ordinary route we had expectation of striking a path somewhat less steep than that of the ascent. But this did not prove the case, and eventually we had to descend rather sharply before regaining the ordinary track above its entry to the glen. So ended the first stage. The fatigue did not prevent worship next day at the quaint little Kincardine church where, after service, there was opportunity of examining the Lepers' Window—an interesting relic but now something of a disappointment, as it is blocked from the inside of the church.

The greater task of Braeriach (4,248 ft.) was still on the programme. In common with the whole range it had suffered from the disappearance of the snow. The corries were comparatively bare and gaunt without any colour to catch the eye, and the realisation was brought home of the part played by contrast in the beauty and attractiveness of mountain scenery. With a uniform fall of snow, it is true, the distinctive features are obliterated; but without a dash of colour, the features become harsh and the romance is merged in naked reality.

Thursday, August 11, was to some extent Hobson's choice, but the prospects, though not ideal, were fairly promising. The "sea level" conditions were not unfavourable, and though mist hung round the higher peaks,

an afternoon view was not quite beyond hope. The ascent of Braeriach has been rendered tedious and in part uninteresting by the closing of the main access by way of Glen Einich. Even were it open, the state of the road renders wheeled transport, especially mechanical, neither very pleasant nor very safe. The alternatives are to tramp up the long glen to the starting point of the climb near Loch Einich, or to proceed by the equally or more tedious Larig route until a convenient point can be reached for deviating on to the mountain. The climb has in either case then to be begun. The latter, which was the route chosen, gave opportunity on the drive up from Coylum Bridge to the Alt-na-Bienne to study a file of "hikers" (as the title runs), some thirty strong, whose eyes were also directed towards the hills. They hailed from a southern commercial centre and were not very communicative, seeming to take their pleasure a little sadly, or, it may have been on guard against suspicious-looking Highland caterans or car bandits! They maintained a steady, determined pace, and evidently the first object was "to get there." It is at any rate a great matter to know that the open air mindedness is spreading so rapidly and has in fact taken such a hold.

The "briggie," which keeps the key to the Larig and in which the Club has a fatherly as well as proprietary interest, was found intact. It continues admirably to serve its purpose, and the well worn path testifies to the increasing use of the Larig route. Otherwise there is little to remark. Twenty years have written no very visible change in direction, stream, or bog. As an approach to the Pass and part of an acknowledged expedition the Larig track is all right. Even as an access to adjacent mountains it may be tolerated. But as a return or "run in" after the fatigues of a preliminary long walk and a hard climb have been undergone, it is an anticlimax and something of a weariness to the flesh. But this is to anticipate.

On the way up no incident occurred. The surroundings seemed unusually quiet, with hardly even a rabbit or a grouse stirring and a complete absence of deer. At a convenient point the path was deserted and faces set toward

the rough and steep slope of the Sron na Larig, or Nose of the Larig, the lowest of the outliers, an "alp" buttressing the main massif on the west side of the Pass. The Larig has very coarse features, especially nose and mouth. The cleft formed by it, it need hardly be recalled, divides the two great ranges, the western of which has Braeriach and Cairntoul (4,241 ft.) as its culminating points, with the Angel's Peak (Einich Cairn, 4,061 ft.) between. The long heather and masses of detached boulders of the Sron na Larig furnish a stiff, rough and rather featureless scramble. What by contrast seems a slope, though in reality a steepish acclivity, follows. Then after a slight descent the route turns rather abruptly to the left (east) and follows in general the enclosing ridge or precipice of the Larig Ghru. At 2,500 - 3,000 feet we ran into the mist, which had thickened rather than dispersed, and thenceforward had to grope along steering by compass and map (Ordnance). The junior member again took "the heavy end of the stick," and with compass, map, and aneroid literally "in hand" laid the course, which on one or two occasions had to be checked by the Larig and other crags. The rather tricky approach to the cairn that marks the summit was from former visits familiar to both, and perhaps in any case

Two are better far than one
For counsel or for fight.

In such wise the top was duly attained.* But imagination had to do service for vision. Such an altitude raises one to a viewpoint which is a reward for all the toil. This particular height affords a distinctive prospect, especially of Glendee and its surrounding monarchs. Then a little farther off stands an array of peaks, great and small, far and near, the veiling of which could not but cause regret. The "dust" had no "palm."

The intention had been to descend to the Wells of Dee,

* There is a slight variation in our impressions regarding one or two of the details of the upper part of the route. I have adhered to my own—always subject to correction. It is only impressions, not scientific description, that can be derived from such an experience, mostly in mist.

the ultimate main source of the water we drink in Aberdeen, in order, among other things, to obtain samples for analysis. The attempt under existing conditions, apart from the immediate one of time, would have been hazardous, and had to be reserved for another day. Our steps must, therefore, be retraced, and with the same care as before. Among other things, an arrow had been drawn to mark the rightangled turn referred to above, and in due course the mist was left behind and the descent completed in safety, though perhaps not wholly without anxiety. On the way back, as already indicated, a rather weary tramp of four or five miles, we were overtaken by a party of friends, some ten or so in number, another welcome token of the craving for the open. They had gone up *via* Glen Einich and were racing back for an evening entertainment.

Long shadows were already being cast by the time the open wood near the bridge was reached, and an unobserved root across the path was the occasion of a *faux pas*, which caused momentary alarm. The result was no worse than an honourable scar, a "landmark" which, by the aid of kindly neighbours, was removed within a week! The day had been essentially fine and the air almost still. But it proved the proverbial lull before the storm. The same night a thunderstorm burst on Strathspey, and for the brief remaining space of holidays there was neither opportunity nor energy for more.

On the 13th a return had to be made to Aberdeen. The thunder was not yet over and the entry to the braif town was made under conditions to which the colonist applies the designation "wash out." The flooding proved the occasion for the provision of a storm water drainage scheme that has cost the city £10,000. That is, perhaps, another affair, but it shows the interconnectedness of things.

My first experience of Cairngorm was somewhere back in the late '80s or early '90s, when I was the guest at Kingussie of the late Very Rev. Professor Milligan, and a large party under the guidance of the late Dr. Robert Walker made the ascent on an ideal summer day. There were no Speyside excursions in those days, and when Braeriach was

tackled by the Club, of which no doubt the *Journal* contains a record, the starting point was Boat of Garten, to which the journey had to be made on the preceding day. The waggonette that conveyed the party was ferried over at what was then literally "the Boat," a chain ferry, and the long drive to Glen Einich was followed by breakfast before the ascent was begun. Mr. McConnochie, the secretary, was leader, and the expedition was in every way a success. The climb from Loch Einich is not long nor difficult, but requires caution in the descent in order to keep clear of the great northern corries. There is an alternative route which follows Loch Einich to the upper end or near it, and has then one "bad step" before the upper plateau is reached. It is highly desirable that the Glen Einich route should again be made practicable for wheeled transport: a modern road would be a boon to sportsmen as well as to mountaineers, whose respective interests are in other respects by no means incapable of being reconciled.