

OVER THE LAIRIG GHRU.

(Tyros in the Cairngorms.)

ALEX. TEWNION.

WHEN we pedalled westward from Braemar one summer evening on our heavily laden bicycles, Harry Wood and I little realised the magnitude of the struggle we had set ourselves when we avowed our intention of crossing the famous Lairig Ghru, the Boulder Pass of the Cairngorms, with bicycles. For this was Harry's first time in Scotland, where he was spending his annual summer holiday, and I myself had never been beyond Derry Lodge; consequently, some of our difficulties will be realised when I mention that our only map was a 10-mile-to-the-inch road-map on which the Cairngorms were marked as a tiny cluster of mountains, and with only those roads indicated which touched the villages on the outskirts of the range.

But as we pushed our machines up the long incline leading westward to the Linn of Dee we were brimful with confidence and enthusiasm, looking forward quite eagerly, in fact, to what we anticipated as an easy hill-path. The immediate prospect was bright; pine woods lined the Linn road on either hand, and progress, though slow, was a simple matter of propelling the bicycles along a steep macadamised road. And so, having time to spare, we stopped at the Corriemulzie Bridge, some 3 miles from Braemar, and made our way by a gap in the fence and down through the trees to a small footbridge crossing 20 feet above the Corriemulzie Burn. Here, creeping gingerly over the extremely rotten, moss-covered tree-trunks forming this bridge, we were rewarded by a splendid view of the Corriemulzie Falls, over 30 feet high, which shoot in spraying cascades to the rocks lining the stream-bed beneath.

On the road again, we wheeled down through the tiny

village of Inverey, and on to the Linn of Dee, where, as it was getting late, we pitched our tent for the night. Strolling afterwards to the Linn we gazed on the water boiling through the tremendous pot-holes, and were lucky enough to spot a salmon making a terrific effort to propel itself up the seething turmoil of waters. Unsuccessful, it fell back to the shelter of a pool to recuperate for another attempt, while, deafened by the incessant roar from the Linn, and almost mesmerised by the foaming convolutions that swirled and boiled up from the depths, we deemed caution advisable and withdrew from the edge of the cauldron.

Morning ushered in a host of midges and the first of our misfortunes. Blue with cold, we crept from our blankets and hastily pulled on our clothes, then tried in vain to light the small collapsible petrol stove I had brought. This stove was a source of constant amusement to Harry: it had no pump, but was guaranteed by its makers to generate its own pressure when heated with a little methylated spirits, though unfortunately it seldom reacted as desired. Apparently it suffered from moods, for the previous evening it had caused us no trouble, but light it would not now that we required it in a hurry. With the stench of spirits and petrol filling the tent, we had to resort finally to the nearby trees for firewood to provide ourselves with breakfast.

Packing after a hasty meal and wheeling our machines to the road, we continued over a very rough gravelled track towards the White Bridge, a white-painted wooden bridge spanning the Dee at the mouth of Glen Dee. There we found a finger-post pointing to the north, proclaiming, "To the Lairig Ghru," and delighted to see a well-trodden track leading up into the hills we cycled along in good style for a few hundred yards. A small shelf of rock jutting across the path was the first intimation we received of pleasures to come, and lifting our cycles over it we trundled them on along a worsening muddy track.

On and up into the hills we climbed, pushing the bicycles on the path and ourselves walking in the rough heather. The sun beat down strongly and hordes of clegs—those pestiferous deer-flies which abound in the Highlands—soon found our

perspiring bodies, settling unfelt on bare knees and necks and sucking heartily till an intense itching warned us of their company. Smack! A cleg would fall to the ground, to be stealthily replaced by another voracious bloodsucker, and so the wearisome process repeated itself every few minutes. We felt thankful that midges did not thrive in the glen, for then our plight would have been truly desperate—there are few worse tortures than midges at their devilish work!

Busily occupied alternately slapping at clegs and lifting the cycles over obtruding boulders and muddy pools, we crept farther and farther into the mountains, passing an old *larach* beside which grew a small birch tree, the last tree on the southern side of the Lairig. A black, rocky mountain drew into sight, towering to the skies and dwarfing its neighbours with its great bulk. This was *Beinn Bhrotain* (we learned later), a barren expanse of tumbled boulders and heather, with a precipitous east face that loomed over us as we crawled ant-like beneath. Beyond rose an even more awesome hill, *Bod an Dhiabhail*, the Devil's Point, with great sloping slabs lining its southern face and a 1,000-foot cliff rising above scree-strewn slopes on the east.

Slipping on rolling pebbles, squelching through bogs and mud and drenched with perspiration, we struggled on, passing a wide glen on our left between *Beinn Bhrotain* and the Devil's Point. At its head stood a high mountain on which rested a large patch of snow—an object of great interest, but one we could spare little time to contemplate, although it was the first occasion we had seen snow lying so late in summer. On we plodded, sometimes carrying the cycles 100 yards at a stretch over stony patches of ground, again pushing them through running water where the path degenerated to a stream. My cycle began to drag. Heavily loaded with gear, it was too burdensome for me to manœuvre with ease, so Harry relieved me of some of the load, including our precious groundsheet. Thus eased, our speed increased a little, but many were the halts caused by the unaccustomed exertion of tramping with bicycles.

The great precipice of the Devil's Point darkened as clouds appeared over the horizon and swept down on the

Cairngorms, threatening rain. The giants of the Cairngorms—Ben Macdhui, Braeriach, and Cairn Toul—were now in sight ahead, but soon mists shrouded the tops and drifted lower down the hillsides till the Devil's Point hid its horn in cloud. Across the Dee appeared a small stone house, a tall figure in a kilt giving a friendly wave as we passed lugging our heavy machines. We returned his gesture and debated as to who would stay in such a lonely spot, but the mystery was solved for us a short distance along, when two men came in sight, bent double under enormous packs.

"Hullo," said one in a sing-song Glasgow accent, looking on us with pity. "I see you're crossing the Lairig."

"Yes," I agreed. "Can you give us a rough idea as to how far we are from Aviemore? And what are all these hills called? Our map isn't too good."

"Surely. You're about 14 miles from Aviemore, and the worst still to come! And this is Glen Dee; yonder is Carrar (Corrou) Bothy, where we're staying a few days; and up there is the Devil's Point, where we'll be climbing to-morrow if the weather holds."

"Not up that face?" I asked, revealing myself as the veriest tyro as I gazed at his nailed boots and the rope festooning his pack.

"Ach! it's not so difficult as it looks," he said disparagingly. "You'll have more trouble crossing the Lairig than we'll have climbing the rocks. You've about 4 miles of boulders to carry the cycles over, and that'll be no easy job."

After advising us about the route ahead they continued on their way to the bothy, while Harry and I dragged our cycles some distance farther. A thin mist swept down Glen Dee from the high cleft of the Lairig, and in a short time enveloped us in a drizzle of rain. Deciding to heed the climbers' warning about the boulders on the Lairig, we searched for, and found, a level stretch of grass by the Dee, which we thought would be ideal for a camping ground. Undoing our packs, we pitched the tent while rain drifted in columns across the hills.

"Where's the groundsheet, Harry?" I asked, seeing it nowhere around.

"H-m-m, I must have left it on my bicycle," he said.

But one look was sufficient to dispel our hopes—it was definitely lost, and, what was worse, it had been our only groundsheet.

"I'll go back and look for it," said Harry, a noticeable lack of enthusiasm in his voice. He knew only too well that our erratic course that day, winding to avoid bogs and rocks, precluded any possibility of finding the groundsheet. Sure enough, when he set out during a lull in the rain, he returned in empty-handed disconsolation, and we wrapped ourselves in our blankets that night with only a raincoat beneath us to prevent the chill dampness of the ground penetrating to our bodies.

During the night a furious storm burst in the mountains. Sheets of solid water lashed down Glen Dee, but our tent had only recently been waterproofed and kept the downpour from penetrating above. Not so beneath. Unthinkingly we had pitched the tent by a high bank of heather-matted rock down which the rain poured in streams to our patch of grass, where it seeped slowly into the ground and transformed it into a boggy morass. Some time through the night I was awakened by the cold and found that our blankets were absolutely soaked; however, I could do nothing in the darkness and, turning over, fell asleep again.

In full daylight we opened the tent-flaps and looked north on a stern and gloomy sight. The V-shaped gap of the Lairig Ghru between Ben Macdhui and Braeriach was half-obscured with swirling mists, and the nearer rocky slopes of Cairn Toul disappeared upwards in a grey pall of dense vapour. Rain still fell heavily in the glen; the hills streamed with water; altogether it was an unprepossessing view for amateur mountaineers to behold. But one small crumb of consolation remained—the stove worked at our first attempt, and we cheered somewhat after a hot breakfast.

Little movement was possible until the weather improved; the rain was too heavy to countenance an advance, and we had no desire to return to Braemar; and so we remained in the tent for several hours, lying on the sodden blankets until the patter of rain on the canvas slackened. Then we hurriedly

struck camp, and packing the equipment on the bicycles carried them over the soaking heather to the path, now a rushing burn. Once more trundling our machines, the stiffness eased from our limbs and with increasing warmth we snapped our fingers at the drizzle which still drifted from the north. Splashing along the track we took burns in our stride, for once wet we had to think only of continued progress and a stream more or less made little or no difference.

Climbing, ever climbing, the cycles bouncing on stones or sticking in pools of mud, we squelched and floundered on to the north, nearer and nearer the grim opening of the Boulder Pass. On our left a great glen came in sight, strewn with riven blocks of granite, where clouds momentarily lifting revealed a great field of snow lying at a steep angle against a semicircle of black cliff—a glimpse only, and a blank grey curtain again hid the scene. The path now mounted amongst enormous boulders fallen from the long tongues of scree sending exploring fingers towards us from the invisible steepes of Ben Macdhui; and more often we had the cycles on our shoulders than on the path—a modern version of an old fable. We toiled on into the mist, the only human beings in a desolate waste of heather, rock, and water, following the dwindling Dee till we came to its birthplace amongst the boulders.

The strain of carrying equipment, food, and cycles became too great for comfort. We removed the packs from the cycles and left the latter by a conspicuous rock, while we covered the first lap of a relay over a faint scratched trail through the boulders. Coming on a small pool of water in the rocks we thought it enough of a landmark to be easily identified in the mist, and dumping the packs beside it returned for the cycles. Hunting for these was no easy task, we found, since innumerable tracks led here, there, and everywhere through the boulder-field; but chance brought us to the machines, and shouldering them we retraced our steps to the pool. The cycles being lighter than the packs, we continued beyond the pool to another, and then two larger ones, tarns of limpid water with a faint tinge of blue, and very cold, floored with even slabs of granite—the Pools of

Dee. These pools, despite their name, are not the source of the Dee; however, in fine weather they have a greater appeal than the actual source, and many a climber has plunged in them for a refreshing dip.

But that day our thoughts were far removed from bathing. All our energies were devoted to carrying our gear over the pass and down to the far-away Aviemore. Continuing above the Pools, we almost trod on some ptarmigan sheltering amongst the rocks. They seemed remarkably tame, and fluttered off protesting our intrusion on their solitude with harsh calls. Almost invisible against the grey boulder-field, with which they blended in perfect harmony—their mottled plumage is Nature's finest camouflage—they were betrayed only by their white wings as they flew a few yards uphill. In the prevailing weather conditions they were safe from marauding eagles, but exposure to the storm had forced them from their usual haunts on the higher slopes to seek what shelter they could find in the Lairig.

By the huge cairn marking the summit of the Lairig, 100 yards from the Pools, we left the bicycles and retraced our steps for the packs, but somehow in the mist we mistook our direction and wandered away up the hillside. Discovering our error when the slope rapidly steepened, we descended to the boulder-field and searched for our packs for some time in vain. Backwards and forwards across the Lairig we stumbled, clambering over gigantic blocks of granite or twisting our ankles in half-hidden crevices, reviling the drifting mists the while. Suddenly, and most providentially, a rent was blown in the vapour by a gust of wind, revealing the packs lying beside a heap of stones which we were positive we had just searched. Rushing to the packs lest the mist close down again, we thankfully slung them on our shoulders and walked back past the Pools to the summit cairn.

Resting by the cairn, we called the wrath of the gods on our heads by cursing the miles of weary boulders, the dense mists, the drizzling rain—but most of all we cursed ourselves. What a business! To trek on and on, with cycles on our backs and little knowledge of where we were going,

seemed the utmost folly. Still, we could afford a few more days to the task if necessary, and after having come so far it were cowardice to turn back. Sitting there, smoking and meditating on our sad lot, we heard a grating clatter approach from the north, out of the solid wall of vapour seething through the Lairig.

"Hullo, there," I shouted. "What's doing?"

A lean and lanky mountaineer loomed out of the mist. "Well, lads, you're having a rest. What's the idea of the bikes up here?"

Rather mournfully we told him we were traversing the Lairig, and that unfortunately we hadn't realised it was such a tough proposition; but could he tell us how far it was to the road.

"Only another 6 or 7 miles," he said cheerfully. "But it's not so bad as all this. Maybe a mile of boulders, that's all, then you've a decent path. . . . Well, I must be pushing on. Wish you luck! So long."

When the sound of his footsteps had died away we looked at one another. Only a mile of boulders left: we should make it yet; and even as the thought crossed our minds the wind freshened from the north and the mists started to disperse. High above, a little remnant of snow became visible, bridging the March Burn where it started its mad rush off Ben Macdhui down to the Pools of Dee. Across the Lairig the tangled heather slopes of Braeriach rolled upwards in surging billows towards a great steep corrie, the Coire an Lairig; and immediately to our north the sharp peak of Creag an Leth-choin jutted skyward above red scree slopes ascending from the Lairig. West of Creag an Leth-choin the rounded tops of Sron na Lairig and Carn Eilrig led the eye down from Braeriach's shoulder to the hazy blue pine-woods and green fields of Strathspey; and far away on the horizon, 30 miles and more to the northward, the sands of the Moray Firth gleamed golden under a warm sun that was just beginning to make itself felt on the Cairngorms. Our spirits rose at the sight—life was worth living after all. With vigour renewed as the sun warmed and dried us after long dreary hours of mist and rain and soaking clothes,

we commenced the last gruelling lap of our journey over the Lairig Ghru.

Backwards and forwards we tramped, portaging our kit in quarter-mile bounds, and at length, well on in the afternoon, we drew clear of the hateful stony desert. Strapping our equipment to the cycles again, we made better speed along a narrow, well-beaten track which led down over gravel banks rising high above the Allt Druidh, the Lairig Burn draining the northern side of the pass. Down, down, ever down we lurched and galloped as our unwieldy machines occasionally took control on the steep path. Steep it is, indeed, for it descends 2,500 feet in 4 miles, and at times we feared for our very necks. But all things must come to an end, and eventually we heaved sighs of relief as the Lairig debouched on to the boggy moors of Rothiemurchus.

But one misfortune often leads to another, and so it proved in our case. From the harsh boulder-strewn wastes of the Lairig and the misery of rain and mist, we entered once more the unhappy hunting grounds of voracious hordes of insects amongst the bogs extending several miles from the Lairig towards the woods of Rothiemurchus. Clegs, midges, and a particularly vicious type of gnat gave us no rest now that we had arrived on easier ground. Once again we suffered the unbearable misery of an itching torture. We slapped, we scratched, we almost turned the air a blistered blue; but the drifting fog of insects inexorably closed its ranks and advanced to the feast. Lumps rose on our faces and knees, our ears became as pendulous blobs of flesh. We slaughtered countless myriads at every blow, but our utmost efforts were unavailing and we almost despaired under the insatiable onslaught. The insects on the Braemar side of the Cairngorms had been bad enough; these were a thousand times worse, and, I believe, the worst in Britain. I have since experienced the effects of insects all over Britain, and more than a few abroad, but I have yet to meet anything that can nearly approach the ravages of the insects in Rothiemurchus Forest. Thank heaven I discovered citronella oil; without it I should never again venture near the north side of the Lairig Ghru. And nor, I warn you, should anyone else.

So, slapping ineffectually at our awful tormentors, we reached the welcome pinewoods and made our way through a maze of tracks till we came to the Allt na Beinne footbridge—a very needful erection in view of the spates to which this “great rocky mountain brook” is liable—and there, almost clear of our tiny friends, we halted for a much-needed rest.

There, by the Allt na Beinne footbridge, the Lairig Ghru proper may be said to end, for, as I have already mentioned, a driving road exists from the bridge to Aviemore. And downright glad we were, too, to reach Aviemore and so bring to a successful conclusion our first attempt at pass-storming, as the foolhardy act of crossing hill-passes with bicycles later came to be known. But our initial traverse of the Lairig roused unsuspected emotions within us, and when later in the evening Harry and I set off northwards from Aviemore and reached the outskirts of the village, we halted for a last view of the tumbling mountains across the Spey Valley. A beam from the setting sun warmed the red screes below the rocky pinnacle of Creag an Leth-choin, and as it lifted heavenward glitters of light were struck from a quartzite slab high up on a jutting tower in Braeriach’s northern corrie. Then our emotional unrest was loosed, and found expression in a solemn vow to the giant Cairngorms: “We shall soon return.”

And we did; and, despite game legs and wives and such like acquired during the war, we still do.