THE LIVING MOUNTAIN

A celebration of
The Cairngorm Mountains
of Scotland

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AIR AND LIGHT

In the rarefied air of the plateau, and indeed anywhere in the mountain, for the air is clear everywhere, shadows are sharp and intense. Watch the shadow of a plane glide along the plateau like a solid thing, and then slither deformed over the edge. Or pluck a feathery grass, brownish-pink and inconspicuous; hold a sheet of white paper behind it and see how the shadow stands out like an etching, distinct and black, a miracle of exact detail. Even the delicate fringe inside the small cup of the field gentian throws its shadow on the petals and enhances their beauty.

The air is part of the mountain, which does not come to an end with its rock and its soil. It has its own air; and it is to the quality of its air that is due the endless diversity of its colourings. Brown for the most part in themselves, as soon as we see them clothed in air the hills become blue. Every shade of blue, from opalescent milky-white to indigo, is there. They are most opulently blue when rain is in the air. Then the gullies are violet. Gentian and delphinium hues, with fire in them, lurk in the folds.

These sultry blues have more emotional effect than a dry air can produce. One is not moved by china blue. But the violet range of colours can trouble the mind like music. Moisture in the air is also the cause of those shifts in the apparent size, remoteness, and height in the sky of familiar hills. This is part of the horror of walking in mist on the plateau, for suddenly through a gap one sees solid ground that seems three steps away, but lies in sober fact beyond a 2000 foot chasm. I stood once on a hill staring at an opposite hill that had thrust its face into mine. I stared until, dropping my eyes, I saw with astonishment between me and it a loch that I knew perfectly well was there. But it couldn't be. There wasn't room. I looked up again at that out-thrust brow – it was so near I could have touched it. And when I looked down, the loch was still there. And once in the Monadhliaths, on a soft spring day when the distances were hazed, valley, hills and sky all being a faintly luminous grey-blue, with no detail, I was suddenly aware of a pattern of definite white lines high above me in the sky. The pattern defined itself more clearly; it was familiar; I realised it was the pattern of the plateau edge and corries of the Cairngorms, where the unmelted snow still lay. There it hung, a snow skeleton, attached to nothing, much higher than I should have expected it to be. Perhaps

the lack of detail in the intervening valley had something to do with this effect.

Rain in the air has also the odd power of letting one see things in the round, as though stereoscopically. The rays of light, refracted through the moisture in the air, bend round the back of what I am seeing. I have looked at a croft half a mile away lying into the hill, with a steading and a cow, and felt as though I were walking round the stacks and slapping the cow's hind quarters.

Haze, which hides, can also reveal. Dips and ravines are discerned in what had appeared a single hill: new depth is given to the vista. And in a long line of crags, such as the great southern rampart of Loch Einich, each buttress is picked out like Vandyke lace. Veils of thin mist drifting along the same great loch-face look iridescent as they float between the sun and the red rock.

For the rock of this granite boss is red, its felspar is the pink variety. Crags, boulders and scree alike are weathered to a cold grey, but find the rock where it is newly slashed, or under water, and there is the glow of the red. After a winter of very severe frost, the river sides of the Lairig have a fresh redness. Here and there one can see a bright gash where a lump of rock the size of a house has fallen; and a very little searching beneath reveals the fallen mass, with one side fresh, or broken into bright red fragments; while nearby is a dark boulder that has lain there for long enough, but from which a red chip has now been struck by the impact of the falling rock.

Or under water: the Beinnie Coire of Braeriach is the least imposing of all the corries – a mere huddle of grey scree. But through it runs a burn that has the effect of sunshine, so red are the stones it hurries over. Farther along the same mountain face, through the deep clear water of Loch Coire an Lochain, even when a thin mist quite covers it, the stones at the bottom are still intense and bright, as though the water itself held radiance. All round the margin of this exquisite loch is a rim of red stones, where the lapping of the water has prevented the growth of lichen.

Thin mist, through which the sun is suffused, gives the mountains tenuous and ghost-like beauty; but when the mist thickens, one walks in a blind world. And that is bad: though there is a thrill in its eeriness and a sound satisfaction in not getting lost. For not getting lost is a matter of the mind – of keeping one's head, of having map and compass to hand and knowing how to use them, of staying steady, even when one of the party panics and wants to go in the wrong direction. Walking in mist tests not only individual self-discipline, but the best sort of interplay between persons.

When the mist turns to rain, there may be beauty there too. Like

shifting mists, driving rain has a beauty of shape and movement. But there is a kind of rain without beauty, when air and ground are sodden, sullen black rain that invades body and soul alike. It gets down the neck and up the arms and into the boots. One is wet to the skin, and everything one carries has twice its weight. Then the desolation of these empty stretches of land strikes at one's heart. The mountain becomes a monstrous place.

I think the plateau is never quite so desolate as in some days of early spring, when the snow is rather dirty, perished in places like a worn dress; and where it has disappeared, bleached grass, bleached and rotted berries and grey fringe-moss and lichen appear, the moss lifeless, as though its elasticity had gone. The foot sinks in and the impression remains. One can see in it the slot of deer that have passed earlier. This seems to me chiller than unbroken snow.

But even in this scene of grey desolation, if the sun comes out and the wind rises, the eye may suddenly perceive a miracle of beauty. For on the ground the down of a ptarmigan's breast feather has caught the sun. Light blows through it, so transparent the fugitive spindrift feather has become. It blows away and vanishes.

Or in a drab season, and feeling as drab as the weather, I stand on a bridge above a swollen stream. And suddenly the world is made new. Submerged but erect in the margin of the stream I see a tree hung with light – a minimal tree, but exquisite, its branches delicate with globes of light that sparkle under the water. I clamber down and thrust a sacrilegious hand into the stream: I am holding a sodden and shapeless thing. I slip it again under the water and instantly again it is a tree of light. I take it out and examine it: it is a sprig of square-stalked St John's Wort, a plant whose leaves are covered with minute pores that can exude a film of oil, protecting it against the water that has engulfed it, in like manner as the dipper, plunging into the stream has a film of light between him and the water. I think of the Silver Bough of Celtic mythology and marvel that an enchantment can be made from so small a matter.

Storm in the air wakes the hidden fires – lightning, the electric flickers we call *fire flauchts*, and the Aurora Borealis. Under these alien lights the mountains are remote. They withdraw in the darkness. For even in a night that has neither moon nor stars the mountains can still be seen. The sky cannot be wholly dark. In the most overcast night it is much lighter than the earth; and even the highest hills seem low against the immense night sky. A flash of lightning will draw them close for a brief moment out of this remoteness.

In the darkness one may touch fires from the earth itself. Sparks fly round one's feet as the nails strike rock, and sometimes, if one disturbs

black ooze in passing, there leap in it minute pricks of phosphorescent light.

Walking in the dark, oddly enough, can reveal new knowledge about a familiar place. In a moonless week, with overcast skies and wartime blackout, I walked night after night over the moory path from Whitewell to Upper Tullochgrue to hear the news broadcast. I carried a torch but used it only once, when I completely failed to find the gate to the Tullochgrue field. Two pine trees that stood out against the sky were my signposts, and no matter how dark the night the sky was always appreciably lighter than the trees. The heather through which the path runs was very black, the path perceptibly paler, clumps and ridges of heather between the ruts showing dark against the stone and beaten earth. But it amazed me to find how unfamiliar I was with that path. I had followed it times without number, yet now, when my eyes were in my feet, I did not know its bumps and holes, nor where the trickles of water crossed it, nor where it rose and fell. It astonished me that my memory was so much in the eye and so little in the feet, for I am not awkward in the dark and walk easily and happily in it. Yet here I am stumbling because the rock has made a hump in the ground. To be a blind man, I see, needs application.

As I reach the highest part of my dark moor, the world seems to fall away all round, as though I have come to its edge, and were about to walk over. And far off, on a low horizon, the high mountains, the great Cairngorm group, look small as a drystone dyke between two fields.

Apparent size is not only a matter of humidity. It may be relative to something else in the field of vision. Thus I have seen a newly-risen moon (a harvest moon and still horned), low in the sky, upright, enormous, dwarfing the hills.

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