

BEINN LAOIGH.

BY JAMES ROSE.

HAVING found Ben Cruachan obdurately in the sulks during the meet of the Scottish Mountaineering Club at Loch Awe in the beginning of April, the writer determined to turn his attention to Beinn Laoigh (Ben Lui), a mountain of which he had heard the most glowing accounts.

On the morning of departure from that most pleasant of mountaineering centres—the Loch Awe Hotel—the weather prospects at first sight seemed as unpromising as on the previous days. A dense mist hid everything from view, obscuring even the loch, but there was a feeling of light in the air that promised better things, and long before Tyndrum was reached, the sun had swept every vestige of cloud from the highest hills, and was blazing from a perfectly clear sky, with an intensity of heat that is seldom felt even in the month of June.

Beinn Laoigh is in a south-westerly direction from Tyndrum, on the march between the counties of Perth and Argyll, at the head of a short valley, four or five miles long, down which comes the Choninish burn, the head stream of the Tay. From Tyndrum the mountain is not visible, and it is only seen for a moment from the train about a mile further down the line on the way to Crianlarich. It does not obtrude itself in the same way on the attention of the tourist as Ben Lawers, Ben More, or Ben Cruachan, and is consequently less known and less frequently visited, but it is a glorious mountain, and worthy the attention of any mountaineer.

There had been a keen frost overnight, and there was not a breath of wind. Away up the flank of the hill, on the opposite side of the valley, the smoke from an engine standing at the head of a train of waggons on the new railway to Fort William rose straight into the morning air, showing that no relief from the heat might be expected even when the higher levels were reached. At 8.45 a start was made, and in about twenty minutes the hill which lies

between Tyndrum and the Choninish valley had been surmounted, and Beinn Laoigh was in full view.

The enthusiastic way in which two gentlemen who had made the ascent of the mountain a day or two before had talked of it, prepared the writer in a measure for a fine sight, but the reality far exceeded the most sanguine expectations. Only those who visit our mountains in winter or early spring can realise how Alpine-like Scottish hills can look when they wear their garb of white. The sight of Beinn Laoigh as it appeared that April morning, rearing its chisel-like crest against the cloudless sky, and with its great thousand-foot corrie filled with snow from top to bottom, might have moved to rapture even the most pronounced disciple of that school of climbers which sees in mountaineering only an exhilarating exercise. But there was no need to stand and admire: the sight was rather one to draw the climber on, for every step made the beauty of the view more apparent.

In an hour the lonely farm-house which stands near the end of the valley had been reached, and half an hour sufficed to descend from the path to the bottom of the glen and to cross the burn, which comes tumbling down out of the corrie in a series of cascades. From this point the ascent of the mountain begins, and every step is upward till the summit is reached.

The best plan of ascent seemed to be to follow the right bank of the burn to the hollow at the foot of the corrie where it takes its rise, and from thence work a way right up the snow-face to the top. The gentlemen who had climbed the mountain three days before had generously given the reversion of the steps they had made in the snow, so that, unless unforeseen circumstances arose to cause a modification, the plan had all the simplicity of the bee-line about it, and seemed only to require time and some muscular exertion for its execution.

The ascent by the side of the stream was very steep, the heat was intense, and it took a good hour before the snow was reached. A short pause here to reconnoitre showed that the original plan would have to undergo considerable

changes. Ahead, the snow slope led all the way to the top, terminating in a long, corniced ridge. On both sides the corrie was bounded by precipitous crags, which extended up steeply to the top, where they united with the ends of the snow cornice. The previous calculations had not taken into consideration the glare of the sun on the snow, and the intense frost of the previous night. With snow spectacles and ice-axe the snow might have been possible, though it is said to lie in some places in this corrie of Beinn Laoigh at as steep an angle as anywhere in Scotland; but such a quantity of snow had not been anticipated, and Alpine appurtenances had been left behind.

No climber would have been willing to abandon, without some effort, a route which seemed to lead so directly to the summit, and, as the glare from the snow seemed the most obvious difficulty, it was resolved, instead of going straight up the corrie, to turn over to the left, where the cliffs threw a considerable part of the snow into shadow. But here the snow was found to be so hard that it was quite impossible to kick steps in it, and I had reluctantly to turn my attention to the possibility of ascending by the rocks.

The right side of the corrie seemed to be the easier and less precipitous, but a choice of that course would have involved a considerable detour, and as the top of the crags above, though certainly steep, seemed to lead right to the summit, the more expeditious way was preferred. Accordingly, a scramble up a short slope of snow, and a longer one of scree and rock, brought me to the crest of the cliffs at their lowest point.

It could now be seen that the line of ascent would lie along what was in most places a true ridge, with a sheer drop on one side down to the snow in the main corrie, and with a steep slope on the other to more snow, which, though lying in great quantities, was not quite continuous, as the flank of the mountain was here broken up into terraces. There was just one point on the ridge where it seemed possible one might be stopped, but I was loth to abandon a route which promised a capital climb.

It is an interesting fact that the rocks of Beinn Laoigh

form the termination of a narrow band of slaty, schistose stone, which stretches diagonally across the country all the way to the Benchnans, having its other end, indeed, in the beautiful Canlochan Glen on the flanks of Glas Maol. However curious this may be from a geological point of view, the way in which this rock disintegrates makes it very unreliable material for the climber, and the small slabs into which it breaks up were scarcely ever found to give a firm foot- or hand- hold ; indeed, many of them had a tendency to come away at the slightest touch.

By the exercise of a little care, however, the point where the serious difficulty was likely to be was safely reached. The "gendarme", as it might be called in Alpine parlance, proved to be a rock twelve or fourteen feet in height, breaking the continuity of the ridge, and bending outward about the middle. To add to the difficulty of the situation, the rocks leading up to it lay at a very sharp angle, and there would have been no chance of recovery if a slip had been made on the obstructing buttress. Between the rock and the top of the cliff ran a narrow ledge of about a foot and a half in width, and this was explored in the hope of finding a way of turning the obstacle in flank. A narrow gully indeed ran up the back of the rock, but it was partly filled with ice, and was at once seen to be impracticable. Not without some trouble my steps were retraced along the ledge, and the former position at the foot of the obstruction recovered.

It was distinctly a tight corner. To descend would have been ignominious, and, owing to the nature of the footing, considerably more dangerous at this point than the ascent had been. The only way of escape, therefore, seemed to be to get round the obstacle on the left. A buttress of the rock that had caused all the trouble barred the view in that direction, and what lay beyond had to be imagined. It was Hobson's choice, and the difficulty had to be tackled. This task, after some care and exertion, was safely accomplished, and to my satisfaction I could now see that a snow slope, which extended, with breaks here and there, right up to the crest of the mountain, could easily be reached.

The snow was by this time very soft, and climbing was somewhat laborious, but the most obvious trouble was from the excessive glare from the great expanse of white. Without any other incident the top of the mountain (3708) was reached at one o'clock, and forty minutes were spent in the enjoyment of one of the loveliest views of mountain and loch that it has ever been my good fortune to witness. The day was perfect: it was delightfully warm, and not a breath of wind stirred.

The first object that fixed the attention was Ben Cruachan, which had at last thrown off the mantle of mist in which for days it had been shrouded; its great aggregation of peaks and corries stood out with striking distinctness in the clear air. As the eye circled round to the east, were to be seen the mountains of Glencoe, and over them the great bulk of Ben Nevis. Far away to the north-east, rising above a sea of other hills, was a great mountain mass that might have been the Cairngorms; nearer were Schichallion and Ben Lawers, and, quite close at hand, the cone-like tops of Ben More and Am Binnein (Stobinain). In the south, Ben Lomond and a strip of the loch looked quite close at hand. Coming round to the west again, the eye rested on Loch Awe and Loch Etive, and the mountains of Mull loomed out of a haze that closed the view in that direction.

But, after all, there was no finer sight in all the landscape than Beinn Laoigh itself, with its great snow-filled corrie, topped by the beetling cornice—the work of the winter storms.

The snow slopes lying to the south of the ridge by which the ascent had been made were chosen for the descent, and one might have glissaded most of the way, if it had not been for their terraced arrangement, and the possibility of shooting over one of the low cliffs which interrupted the slope in all directions. The point from which the ascent had been begun was reached in an hour, and a leisurely walk down the glen, with many a backward look at Beinn Laoigh, brought me again to Tyndrum, and terminated a day among the mountains such as seldom falls to one's lot in this changeable climate of ours.