

BEN CRUACHAN.

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FROM the scattered cottages clustering by the shores of Loch Etive that bear the name of Bonawe, the lofty peak of Ben Cruachan, peeping over his massive shoulders, is conspicuous— or, I should rather say, *one* of the peaks of the many-topped Ben. Stob Dearg is its name, and its height is 3611 feet; the principal summit, which is 3689 feet above the level of the loch, being situated about half a mile further east. The River Awe, issuing out of the loch of the same name in the Pass of Brander, winds round the base of the mountain, and flows into Loch Etive at the Ferry of Bonawe. To cross the river, you follow the Dalmally road some 3 miles up, through charming woods of birch and hazel, to the Bridge of Awe. Such, at least, is the usual route taken in the ascent from Bonawe or Taynuilt; it is the most direct, and it is also the easiest; and this was the way that we took one bright morning towards the end of August.

From the Bridge of Awe to the free hillside it is but a step, and our feet were at once treading the grassy slopes, and bearing us waist-deep through the bracken. Emerging from the fern, we presently struck the Allt Cruiniche, a picturesque ravine, broken up by scattered rocks and trees, through which the burn clamours in many a dashing waterfall and thundering cascade. The fascination which this pretty bit of scenery exercised over one of our number, whose love of the picturesque and gaiety of spirit were in greater evidence than his agility on a hillside, was amusing to observe. With what unceasing pleasure, after a stiffer pull than usual, he would return to the absorbed contemplation of the beautiful dell at our feet! Or, at times, if we happened to be making our way through some interesting little bog (especially if a flat-topped block of granite were conveniently near), it would be a lovely patch of marsh moss that would claim his undivided attention for five minutes!

And then, refreshed and reinvigorated, he would marshal his forces once more to the assault.

The beauty of the early morning which had gladdened our hearts before starting, was by this time, however, sadly overcast, and a dull vaporous haziness crept over the face of sky and landscape. To the west, instead of an ever-extending prospect of heather hill and sea and island, the higher we ascended, the thicker grew the haze, blotting out entirely the distant view ; above us the clouds had slowly gathered and settled on the summit and were steadily creeping down ; and when, after crossing the burn and traversing some rather flat marshy ground, we at length stepped on to the granite, we were soon wrapped in their dense folds.

The transition from heather or grass to the rough granite is always delightful to the mountaineer. The foothold is security itself. The crunch of the hobnailers on the gritty texture of the rock is delicious in his ears. By this time, further, the sultry air of the lowlands is left below, and the pure mountain breeze blows life and refreshment into the lungs, and imparts new vigour and elasticity to the muscles. Our pace rapidly quickened ; we strode and sprang from block to block, delighted to encounter, now and again, masses of masonry of a larger and more rugged build, that called into play the hands as well as the feet, and while the enjoyment of the exercise was at its keenest, the cairn loomed through the mist, and we stood on the summit of Stob Dearg.

And here a magnificent surprise awaited us. Instead of a dense white wall meeting the eye in every direction and shutting out all beyond (as had been the case during the ascent, and as we had expected to find on the top), though behind us we could see nothing, to the north and east we saw below and around us, the clouds wreathing and eddying in great billowy masses, and breaking in soft, fleecy waves against the precipices that form the northern face of the mountain. On the other side of the great corrie in this northern face, called Coire Chat, wherein the mist seethed, as it were in some mighty cauldron, towered the proud peak of Cruachan—now wrapped in a close-folding curtain of

mist, as the clouds swept up in their solid battalions and blotted it from sight; now rending them asunder, and soaring majestically above them, their snowy banners streaming from its rugged sides. And through the massive portals of the clouds, the eye leapt to Loch Etive winding far below among the recesses of the hills, which heaved and tossed in wild confusion, stretching away, range behind range, into the distant north. Conspicuous in this mountain wilderness burly Ben Starav buried his bare brow in a canopy of cloud. Beyond, the Buchailles of Etive, Bidean nam Bian, the shattered crags above Glencoe, and the great Blackmount summits, seemed shorn of their peaks by long level layers of cloud. And to the north-east, the eye shot out in its widest sweep, and revelled in an exquisite study of colour—the sky in the distant horizon was clear and blue, the valleys and moors in the middle distance were chequered with alternating sunshine and shadow, and flecked with sparkling lochs and tarns, and the far-off mountain ranges clad themselves in hues borrowed from heaven itself.

A steep descent of several hundred feet brought us to the ridge that connects Stob Dearg with the principal summit of Ben Cruachan. The walk along this ridge is singularly fine. The northern face is one continuous precipice, and forms the great corrie, Coire Chat. The path is strewn with granite blocks which give the climber abundant exercise, and ever and again huge gashes in the mountain side open out at his very feet, and carry him, in imagination, at one bound far into the depths of the corrie, the weirdness of the effect being wonderfully enhanced by the necessity of occasionally crossing a ledge overhanging the abyss, with the mist swirling below.

A short scramble placed us on the summit and above the clouds, and the fine view we had from Stob Dearg delighted our eyes once more. Stob Dearg itself, as seen from this point, is rounded in outline, the great precipice on the north seemingly gouged out of the mountain side, losing itself midway in curling cloud wreaths, then plunging from their entanglements into the glen beneath. The air was delightfully mild and refreshing, and half an hour

slipped rapidly away in identifying, with map and compass, such hills as were visible through the constantly-shifting barriers of the clouds. At last we turned our thoughts to the descent. A late start had deprived us of the time necessary to do the other peaks of the mountain, and the majority of our number, with visions of dinner floating before their minds, favoured a return by the direct route to Taynuilt. But the more I saw of the northern face, the more I was fascinated by its charms; and so my friend G. E. Thomson and I resolved to make the descent into Glen Noe, returning home by the shores of Loch Etive. The party accordingly divided, and we set out by the ridge that runs N.N.E. from the summit.

The ridge descended on either hand with great abruptness; to our left was Coire Chat, now clear of clouds, to our right was Coire Caorach, separating us from the next peak, Drochaid Ghlas, and filled with a sea of cloud that sharply terminated on the crest of the ridge. Suddenly I observed a small rainbow of circular form on this cloudy embankment to our right, a little distance below us, and hardly had I called Thomson's attention to it when the colours brightened, a bright halo appeared in the centre, and on the halo were projected, with perfect clearness, our two figures, larger than life. It was the first time I had had the good fortune to witness this singular phenomenon, known as the "Spectre of the Brocken", and with intense interest we regarded it while it reproduced with perfect fidelity every movement of our bodies and every gesture that we made. At first it was rather faint, but as the sun shone with increasing strength through the thick cloudy screen overhead, it grew brighter, and the figures projected on the halo increased in distinctness of outline. Then, as the clouds intercepting the sun's rays again thickened, it would slowly fade away, presently to return, however, even clearer than before; and thus with varying intensity, it gratified our eyes for several minutes, until, gradually growing fainter and fainter, it finally disappeared. We lingered a little longer, on the chance of its reappearance, but the sun was now too effectually obscured by the clouds to give much hope for

this, and so, turning our backs on the ridge, we cut down hill.

The slopes were very rocky, and many a fine clamber had we over the crags and boulders with which they were strewn—now cautiously traversing smooth slippery slabs of granite that offered but precarious footing—now scrambling down a short precipitous face, and dropping on to a grassy ledge, only to find another of the same character awaiting us; and after a good deal of this rough work—the most sporting and enjoyable part of the whole day—we at length found ourselves scampering over the heather towards the burn. Crossing the burn that romps its merry way down a small tributary glen from Coire Chat to Glen Noe, we struck a short distance up the opposite hillside, kept a horizontal course round the shoulders of Meall Riaghain until we were near the mouth of Glen Noe, and then, racing down hill, we joined the rough track that follows the windings of the loch. The afternoon had, after all, turned out magnificent, and the scenery along this part of the route was extremely beautiful. Charming woods reached down to the water's edge, and the loch, sparkling in the sunlight, and mirroring the reflections of the clouds and the surrounding hills, stretched away to its far limit among the mountains. A delightful walk along these beautiful shores, over the granite slabs that constitute the path for a considerable part of the way, and through the long heather in which it occasionally lost itself, brought us at last to the ferry across the Awe. A few minutes then sufficed to take us home to a sumptuous meal—enjoyed all the more after our capital day's tramp.