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SGURR NAN GILLEAN.

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“ Lovest thou mountains high,
Peaks to the clouds that soar,
Corrie and fell where eagles dwell,
And cataracts dash evermore ?

Then go to the Isle of Mist ”.

THE main feature of the Coolins from the geological point of view seems to be *gabbro*. The peculiarities of this rock are, first the splendid surface it presents to the climber, and, next, the felicity with which it adapts itself to the production of all that is characteristic and grand in nature's architecture. In both these respects it puts Aberdeen's favourite rock entirely in the shade. The truth of this seeming heresy is apparent to every visitor to the Coolins, for there comparison between the two formations is forced upon the mind and cannot be avoided. One has only to glance from the tame, round summits and grassy slopes of the Red Hills to the towering pinnacles and dizzy precipices which frown darkly upon them from the other side of narrow Glen Sligachan, or to contrast their gently-swelling shoulders with the splendid ridge of Blath Bheinn (Blaven) in the southern background, to acknowledge—be he artist, climber, or simple tourist—the incontestable triumph of *gabbro* over granite.

The headquarters for the Coolins is Sligachan Hotel. This remote and lonely, but comfortable, house stands near the head of Loch Sligachan, at a point about nine miles south

of Portree, and two from the base of the nearest (northern) ridge of Sgurr nan Gillean. A "bus" runs from Portree every morning in summer, and as there is also both rail and telegraphic communication between the two places, solitary Sligachan maintains constant touch with the busy world outside.

It was a lovely forenoon near the beginning of August when Mr. Brown and I arrived at the hotel. For the last few miles of our drive the beautiful, sharp-peaked summit of the mountain whose fame had attracted us to the distant "Isle of Mist" had been full in view, standing out clearly and invitingly against the dark blue of a cloudless sky. We fell in love with it at first sight—succumbed to its powerful fascination without a struggle. The noble ardour of the mountaineer in presence of a peak worthy of his ambition came upon us with power, and, combined with the consideration that such another day in the fickle weather of a Skye August might long be looked for in vain, decided us to lose no time in making our attack. In such circumstances to resolve is to do. We threw on our "knickers" in haste, and, without even waiting for lunch, which was almost ready, set off with vigorous stride across the boggy moor.

The top of Sgurr nan Gillean (3169) may be described as the point of junction of three great rocky ridges, which ascend, roughly speaking, from the W., N., and S.E. The last of these affords the ordinary tourist route to the summit, and by it we elected to make our first attempt. A cheerful impression concerning the existence of a track across the moor holds a place, as we afterwards learned, in the minds of the Sligachan populace. Something of the kind open to detection by the keen eye of an Indian scout *may* exist, but for us "it was not". If we ever strayed into it at all, we did so in ignorance, and did not remain there long. For making, to the best of our ability, straight towards the depression, or "Saddle", visible in the sky-line of the ridge near its lower end, we held too far to the right, and, at one point, had to negotiate some steep, slabby rocks well up on the flank of the mountain. Safely over this

ugly place, we at once plunged into the fatiguing region of the scree slopes. These, however, being fortunately of no great extent, were soon surmounted. A lively scramble over huge boulders, piled at a considerable angle, followed, and shortly brought us, in a state of semi-fluidity, to the point which had been the object of striving so far.

Our reward was immediate and out of all proportion to the insignificant exertion which had placed it within our reach. The savage grandeur of the scene spread out before us must baffle all attempts at adequate description. Far below, looking almost level from our lofty standpoint, lay the boulder-strewn floor of the great theatre of Lota Corrie. Almost exactly circular in appearance—its only outlet, Harta Corrie, being hidden from view by the intervening mass of Sgur-na-h-Uamha on the left—it gave to the beholder the strong and ever-growing impression of looking into the crater of some vast extinct volcano. All around, in gloomy magnificence, rose the stupendous and nearly perpendicular crags of the Black Coolins, their serrated ridges crowned by the picturesquely jagged pinnacles so characteristic of the range. Above the lower peaks, at fairly regular intervals, towered the well-marked summits of Sgurr nan Gillean, the Bhasteir, Bruach na Frith, Bidein Druim nan Ramh, and others, whose names, if ever I knew them, now form one of the volumes of my forgotten lore. The whole prospect offered, to eye and mind, such a picture of dark and rugged sublimity as I did not think even Skye could have produced.

At a short distance above the "Saddle" the ascent is best continued by keeping downward to the left or Lota Corrie side of the ridge, where the going is comparatively easy. Until a point some sixty or eighty feet below the summit is reached, there is nothing to try the "grit" of even the veriest tyro in mountaineering; but then matters change somewhat. All at once the angle of ascent becomes much more acute, while the rocks put a marked restraint on the former freedom of their invitations to hand and foot. The result is, that of the tourists who "do" Sgurr nan Gillean, not a few omit altogether to tackle this last stretch,

consoling themselves with the knowledge that they have been *practically* on the top—a fact which, in the course of time, seems not infrequently to develop itself, by some mysterious process of evolution, into the totally different one that they have been *actually* there.

The extreme summit of Sgurr nan Gillean consists of a table-shaped rock extremely limited as to its length, and still more so as to its breadth. It is of course surmounted by the inevitable “stone-man”. On every side but one the fall is so steep that a moderately vigorous spring, in almost any direction, would relieve the world-weary mountaineer of all further toils, troubles, and ambitions.

What little time could be afforded was spent in admiring the unequalled view from the summit, one of the most extensive within the compass of the British seas. Its very vastness prevents its leaving any clear-cut impression on the mind. Hence, notwithstanding my having seen it twice in the most magnificent Skye weather, and that is not saying little, it dwells chiefly with me as a somewhat vague memory of limitless expanse and glorious colouring. Still, I think, it must be here, on the summit of his favourite mountain, more than anywhere else in the island, that the stranger can realise the strength of the longing which burst from the heart of Alexander Nicholson, in the pathetic words of his lovely song:—

“ My heart is yearning for thee, O Skye,
Dearest of islands ” !

No one, be he a native of the “ Great Central Plain ” itself, who has looked forth upon the glory of mountain, sky, and sea, in the pearly light of a brilliant autumn evening, from the peak of Sgurr nan Gillean, but will find an echo to that cry in his own heart. The Coolins, like the Alps, though, of course, to a less degree, cast a glamour and a charm over the whole life of the mountaineer who once makes their acquaintance—a charm powerful, never-failing, lifelong ; the charm of the everlasting hills, which no man can define, and no man express.

Now, the ascent of Sgurr nan Gillean by the ordinary route, though so well worthy of being made on its own

account, was undertaken by us rather in the light of a reconnoitring expedition than as a serious piece of "work". In our hearts we cherished the hope of reaching the summit by the northern ridge—over the now well-known "Pinnacle Route"—and wished to survey our line of approach from above. The Pinnacle Route derives its name from the fact that it leads the climber over a series of four narrow, sharp-pointed peaks, of gradually increasing height and difficulty, to the summit of the fifth. These peaks are numbered (though, unfortunately, not always) from the lowest upwards. The first three have no "proper" names, and are always referred to simply as the first, second, and third pinnacles; the fourth is known as Knight's Pinnacle, while the fifth is Sgurr nan Gillean itself. The Pinnacle Route offers to the moderately experienced cragsman a delightful sample of what Skye can produce in the way of interesting rock-work. Probably no finer scramble can be had in any part of the British Islands. Carelessness can nowhere be indulged in without the danger of a serious mishap. The "sporting" character of the route forms its chief charm; but for the man subject to giddiness, as for the novice in rock-climbing, "sporting" reads "perilous". To meet their case, I would at once substitute the word "danger" for "charm", and add to the former all the emphasis at my command. What is easy and pleasant to one must on no account be attempted by all. I therefore seriously say to the beginner, especially if he be alone, "No road this way"! Even in the company of experts, and perfectly secure against any serious accident, some of the more distinctly sensational places would possibly be found to put a tolerably severe strain on his nerves.

Previous to our final dead set at the Pinnacle Route, we twice made a *sortie* as far as the top of the first pinnacle. On the first of these occasions we took the route adopted later on. On the second we went up a gully leading from the bottom of the Bhasteir Corrie. This we found easy, with the exception of one decidedly bad bit, which cost some little trouble, but which could have been avoided by choosing one of the other

branches into which the gully divides lower down. On the summit of the ridge the wind was raging with a fury of which its strength in the lower region gave but little indication. Great masses of snow-white mist scoured like drift over and between the pinnacles; now partly revealing, while magnifying ten-fold, their rugged outlines, and next instant shutting them entirely out from view. The scenic effects were exceedingly grand; but as the force of the wind made the maintenance of an erect posture a matter of no little difficulty, while the driving rain soaked us to the bone, we were soon glad to seek once more the lee side of the sheltering ridge. The next morning opened clear and sunny. Everything promised an exceptional climbing day, and the promise was kept to the full. With the single exception that the too great glare of sunlight proved pretty trying to the eyes among the rocks, the weather remained perfect. The brilliantly clear sky was undimmed by a single cloud, and not a zephyr arose to disturb the serene calm of the atmosphere. Our second ascent of "The Young Men's Peak" thus took place under unusually favourable auspices, and will, I am sure, long remain in both our memories as one of the most enjoyable of all our mountaineering experiences.

Crossing the burn by the stepping-stones at the game-keeper's cottage, we retraced our steps of the preceding day, and, clambering over the steep slabs of a sort of subsidiary ridge, came full upon the great rocky buttress forming the base of the first pinnacle. This buttress, nearly perpendicular at first but sloping off towards the top, everywhere affords excellent holds for both hands and feet. The continuation of the route over the first and second pinnacles is simply and literally a walk. It is at the bottom of the third pinnacle that the real climbing begins. But though, from this point onward, the utmost care has to be exercised, no serious difficulty is encountered until one comes face to face with the problem—how to reach the bottom of the col between the third and fourth pinnacles. This is a real difficulty, and I may at once say that the descent at this point forms the only actual *mauvais pas* in the whole line

of the Pinnacle Route. After crossing the rather shakyl-looking rock which forms the extreme summit of the peak (height 2920 feet), a position is reached a few yards from the end of the ridge where the recognised route turns abruptly to the right. Here a drop of some ten feet over a slightly overhanging rock to the steep ledges of the Bhasteir Corrie has to be made. A man with a long reach might manage to do this without aid; but as the result of a mistake would certainly prove fatal, the use of the rope is advisable in any case. We were, of course, provided with that safeguard against accident, and used it. There is, I believe, a way to avoid the drop altogether, by descending into the Corrie from a point nearer the top of the pinnacle. But we did not know of this safety route at the time, and somehow failed to discover it for ourselves.

Knight's Pinnacle, with its double-peaked summit (highest point 3000 feet), gives in itself a splendid choice of really fine rock climbing. The usual route from the col to the top lies along a ledge to the right. It is plainly enough marked, and why we did not take it I am totally unable to explain. Be that as it may, we, rather stupidly, as I now think, kept up the rocks to the left. Smoother than any we had yet encountered, and dipping rapidly downwards, the holds they afforded were about as unsatisfactory as can well be imagined. Nevertheless, with a determination that would have been praiseworthy, if it had not been idiotic, for we quickly became convinced that we were off the proper track, we stuck to our "variation". Fortunately the slope soon eased off a little, and we presently got into country where the eyelids were no longer considered necessary as a means of adhesion, but only after doing the stiffest bit of climbing we met with on the whole ridge.

The descent to the col, between the fourth and fifth pinnacles, is easily enough accomplished by following the nailmarks on the rocks. If this is not attended to, the true line may be missed, and a nasty drop of at least a dozen feet have to be negotiated, as Brown, who was descending first, found to his cost. Above the col the rocks of Sgurr nan Gillean rise sheer and impracticable. A short, but at one

place awkward, descent has therefore once more to be made into the Bhasteir Corrie, in order to circumvent them. Once this is done the rest is easy. Half-an-hour's steady climbing, guided by an occasional small cairn, should suffice to place one by the side of the stone-man on the summit. The last part of the ascent is most easily accomplished by crossing the crest of the western ridge, about twenty yards to the right of the culminating peak, and keeping to the Lota Corrie side till the top is reached. The whole ascent from the hotel should take from about four to six and a half hours, according to the qualifications of the climbers.

Now, just a few practical hints to conclude :—(1) June, and, next to it, July, are probably the best months for Skye. August is apt to turn out windy, wet, and misty. Mist in itself would prove no bar to the ascent of the Pinnacle Route, but a strong wind greatly increases both the difficulty and the danger. (2) The climber should take at least two pairs of strong “knickers” with him. A pair of thick leather gloves for those who have tender fingers would also be found useful. The effects of a single day's work among the *gabbro* rocks, both on clothing and skin, are sometimes deplorable. (3) A rope, or better, a couple—60 foot lengths—should always form part of the climber's impedimenta. Good climbers would probably not require to use it more than once over the whole Pinnacle Route, but those who cannot class themselves as such, should “tie up” at the foot of the third pinnacle, and not untie until the summit is reached. (4) The best map is the 6 in. O. S. Map, but it is clumsy. A good handy article is *Mr. C. Pilkington's “Corrected Map of the Coolins”*, price 6d., post free, from John Heywood & Co., Deansgate, Manchester. (5) The compass is almost useless among the Coolins, owing to the strongly magnetic character of the rocks. (6) Articles on climbing in Skye have appeared from time to time in the *Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal*. They should be consulted before any “plan of campaign” is formed.