

THE
Cairngorm Club Journal.

Vol. I.

JULY, 1894.

No. 3.

THE TORRIDON HILLS.

BY WILLIAM BROWN, M.A., LL.B.

THE rugged mountain chain that stretches along the western seaboard of Ross-shire, rising landwards through a wild series of peaks and corries to the dominant summits of Mam Sodhail and Carn Eige, but exhibiting its grandest and most characteristic features within sound and sight of the Atlantic, contains nothing of greater interest to the mountaineer than the vast upheaval on the shores of Upper Loch Torridon, which the storms and rains of the west coast have carved into the rude architecture of the Torridon Hills.

Very striking is the contrast between those western giants and the round undulating mountains of the Central Highlands, whose topmost ridges are so frequently mere incidents on a high moorland region, in which the nearer and lower blots out the higher and more remote. How different are Liathaich and Beinn Eighe, Beinn Alligin and Beinn Dearg, whose clean-cut summits spring full-born from the sea, or tower majestically over the blue waters of Loch Maree. How different, also, from the dark hillsides of the Grampians and their black peat mosses and the browns and greens of the heather, are those quartzite slopes that glisten white as snow, in contrast with the black moorland out of which they rise.

To the geologist, also, as well as to the climber, these peaks are of interest. Here may be seen, in text-book perfection, the strata piled one above the other—the sandstone resting upon the Hebridean gneiss, and the quartzite upon

the sandstone—which gave rise to the historical controversy between Murchison and Nicol. In the same group, too, and lying side by side, are formations diametrically different, affording ample materials for a scientific discussion, as an interlude in the climbing. Beinn Eighe is a quartzite mountain; Liathaich is of sandstone; yet a strong man might throw the proverbial biscuit from the quartzite of the one to the sandstone of the other. These rapid changes in the character of the rock, so perplexing to the climber, who has suddenly to exchange the gritty sandstone, with its grand foot- and hand- holds, for the smooth treacherous quartzite, is nowhere better illustrated than on the summit ridge of Liathaich, where two out of the three summits are of quartzite and the third of sandstone. On Liathaich, too, the properties of the “*Torrison Red*” are most characteristically displayed. Looking up at the terraced cliffs which tower over dark Glen Torrison, one can trace the horizontal layers for miles along the glen, and on a spring or autumn day, after a fresh fall of snow, the appearance of the mountain is just as if a huge rake had been dragged carelessly across its face. Glacier action, too, has left its unmistakable impress all over this interesting region. Ice-worn rocks are abundant; huge boulders are perched everywhere, in the most incredible positions, on the hillsides, telling of an age when the ice and the mountains struggled for mastery; and in “the valley of the hundred hills”, at the mouth of Allt a’ Choire Dhuibh Mhoir, moraines are to be met with which are among the most remarkable in the country.

One difficulty which the mountaineer in this district will always have to reckon with, is the want of a really good centre, for Kinlochewe, which is usually recommended, is a centre only in name. It is situated at the most easterly extremity of the range, at a distance so remote from Beinn Alligin and Beinn Dearg, that if the ascent of those mountains is contemplated, it will be necessary for all but the strongest, to drive to and from Torrison, a distance of 24 miles. The alternative is to put up for a few nights at Torrison itself, but, so far as I know, there is only one

house where lodgings can be obtained, and, besides being somewhat rough, it will depend upon the mood of your prospective hostess, whether you are taken in or not. All things considered, Kinlochewe, with its snug little inn, and post and telegraph office hard by, is the safest, as well as the most comfortable, place to stay at, especially if an attack is to be made upon Slioch, and his neighbours, on the north side of Loch Maree.

Supposing, then, that the intending climber has arrived at Kinlochewe, what can he do in the course of a few days there? The answer to this, as well as to the further question, what should he attempt? must depend, to a large extent, upon his climbing ability, for the ascent of those wild quartzite mountains is not a thing to be lightly undertaken.

Naturally his first ambition will be the grand quartzite peak behind the hotel, which forms the near and visible end of bulky Beinn Eighe (the file mountain). To reach the highest top—Ruadh-Stac Mor (the big red stack, 3309)—one may either begin with the deerstalkers' path, which leaves the Gairloch road three-quarters of a mile west from the hotel, following it into the Toll a' Ghuibhais (hollow of the fir trees), whence the mountain may be climbed by its N.E. shoulder; or a longer but easier way may be found by driving to Bridge of Grudie, and tracking that stream to its source. Energetic climbers will, however, prefer to traverse the mountain from end to end, as Mr. Rose and I attempted to do early last April, when the winter's snow was still deep in the corries.

Leaving the inn at 9.30, we struck a bee line across the moor to the foot of the great white cone, which somehow or other has managed to cloak its identity under the inappropriate title, Creag Dubh (the black crag). The ascent of this buttress can be easily made by its northern or eastern ridges, or, if a steeper climb is desired, it can be scaled *en face*. We chose the latter route, in the belief that it would prove the most interesting, but the snow, with which it was covered, had for hours been subjected to a broiling sun, and was naturally very soft. Never, except

at the very top, where the gradient steepened to over 40°, was step-making a necessity, and then a few vigorous kicks did all that was needful. From the summit, which is just over 3000 feet, the ridge of the Fhir Duibh (black men) starts off in a south-westerly direction. For some distance it is broad and easy, and such as the veriest tyro in mountaineering can safely traverse. Quite suddenly, however, it narrows to a few feet, and then the conviction gains ground that the ascent of the Black Men is not the simple affair that it appears to be from below. For from this point onwards, the crest of the ridge is terribly shattered, and the climber is called upon to use his hands, feet, and wits, in negotiating a series of sharp teeth, which project like chimney cans from a house top. They cannot be avoided, if that be desired, as the slopes pitch precipitously downwards on either side, leaving no room for discretionary tactics. A rope, if the party is carrying one, will be found a reassuring companion at this stage.

The top of Sgurr an Fhir Duibhe (the peak of the black men) safely reached, we sat down to enjoy the wide mountain prospect that lay spread out in the perfect calm of this April day. All around, as far as the eye could penetrate the haze, a tumultuous assemblage of snow-capped peaks was all that was left to us, in this mountain solitude, of the busy world we had turned our backs upon a few short hours before. Slioch, the Fannichs, Sgurr a' Mhuilinn, the torn summits of Achnashallach, double-peaked Beinn Damh—they were all there and hundreds more, stretching into the shadowy south. But nearer and more interesting by far were the sister summits of Beinn Eighe and the other peaks of the Torridon range. It is only here, standing between comparative fertility on the one hand, and absolute sterility on the other, that one can realise the extreme barrenness of those storm-beaten heights. Words cannot describe how shattered and rent and verdureless is the northern face of Sgurr Ban, and the great eastern wall of Spidean Coire an Leacan, which resemble, in their ruin, the ramparts of some mediæval castle after a cannonading by modern artillery. Equally impressive, too, are the great bluff of Ruadh-Stac,

the rocky cone of Sail Mhor (the big heel, 3217), and, in the distance, the triple peaks of Liathaich, gathered from this standpoint into a single mass. Further west, Beinn Alligin and Beinn Dearg, and the lesser summits of Baosbheinn and Beinn an Eoin close the picture and our survey of the scene.

The ridge now turns to the west, and for almost two miles, till Spidean Coire an Leacan is reached, the "going" is rough to the verge of impracticability. First comes a drop of nearly 400 feet, where a single false step will start a jingling avalanche of stones and gravel. Then rock and scree lead steeply again to the top of Sgurr Ban (the white peak, 3188), the third in rank of the three principal summits of Beinn Eighe. There are the same features here and elsewhere along the broken ridge that winds thread-like round the great Coire an Leacan as are to be found in every nook and corner of this remarkable mountain. Truth to tell, there is not much to describe, except endless scree slopes, stretching sombre and gray among the black rocks and the virgin snow that gleams coldly in the corries far into summer. Timid pedestrians may think of their families while crossing some of the nastiest places on the ridge, but, for the most part, it is perfectly safe, and such even as ladies (with apologies for the adverb) would be justified in attempting.

It was now 4 o'clock. We had reached Spidean Coire an Leacan, and the ridge was but half traversed. Away westwards we could see it wending a tortuous course towards Coinneach Mor and the Ruadh-Stac, with little prospect of being able to follow its lead; for already the the curse of a late start was upon us. So we resolved to leave the western tops for a future occasion and descend at once to the Torridon road over Stuc Coire an Laoigh, a subsidiary peak bounding Spidean on the east. Between the peaks is a large corrie carrying immense quantities of snow, over which we glissaded merrily, starting a great eagle, which flew slowly and majestically across our path, not fifty yards distant. Racing down the lower slopes, we reached the road at 6 o'clock, and Kinlochewe an hour and a half later.

One impression at least our day on Beinn Eighe had done much to strengthen ; and that was the unquestionable superiority of Liathaich (the gray one) over all its fellows. It is *the* mountain of this wild mountain group, grand, wonderful, and unique, from whatever quarter you approach it. Nothing could be more sternly impressive than its aspect from Torridon, where its shattered cliffs seem to hang over the houses, threatening them with instant destruction, or more majestic than the great bluff that overlooks Loch Clair, rising, as one writer says, "uncompromisingly bold and steep from the moraine-strewn corrie, like the stem of some mighty vessel plunging in a tempestuous sea".

Starting next morning at 9.20, we drove six miles up the Torridon road to the entrance of Choir Dhuibh Mhoir (the big black corrie), over which the great eastern peak of Liathaich keeps watch and ward. This summit—Spidean a' Choire Dhuibh Bhig—is probably just over 3000 feet, although no height is mentioned on the Ordnance maps. Viewed from below the way up it is not very obvious ; and anyone who has peered over its steep, craggy summit will be inclined to pronounce the same opinion as to the way down. Yet both are comparatively easy, though excessively arduous. The first stage of the ascent consists of grassy slopes of enormous steepness, broken here and there by the terraced crags which are so characteristic of the mountain. Then comes a zone of rocks, drawing a complete cordon round the hill, and above all a steep scree slope, passing from sandstone into quartzite as the top is neared. The rocks alone present any real difficulty ; and bad generalship and a certain awkwardness in climbing might convert them into a very serious obstacle.

Beyond the summit, the crest of the ridge has worn very thin, a fact which is always coincident with a return to the sandstone. Broken and crumbly rocks abound, and great care has to be exercised. Further on the quartzite again asserts itself, and the ridge becomes sensibly broader and easier, and the rocks less numerous.

At last, at 1.30, after many ups and downs, and rough scrambles over the sandstone rocks, we land on the

summit of the final peak—Spidean a' Choire Leith (peak of the gray corrie, 3456)—a beautiful pyramid of glistening snow that draws sharply and evenly upwards from every side. Hardly are we arrived there when a hail storm, which has been gathering in the west, bears down upon us, and mars the prospect of a perfect view. Before, however, the obscurity is complete, a panorama of southern mountains, with Sgurr Ruadh as centre piece, stands out, as in a frame, with a clearness which gathers intensity from contrast with the surrounding gloom. A moment later and Baosbheinn shows dimly through the advancing clouds, a curl of mist twisting and twining along its summit ridge. Further north the rain-bars fall in a dense phalanx, showing in places a gleam of sunlit mountains beyond. Suddenly the sun, whose presence we could only guess at from its reflections on the distant hills, bursts the thick mantle of cloud overhead, and throws a golden radiance over the dull gray slopes of Beinn Liath Mhor, beyond, and to the right of which, we can catch a glimpse of the rocky point of Fuar Tholl, projected like a blot of ink upon the expanse of sunlit haze. Eastwards the vast bulk of Beinn Eighe blots out the distant scene, which is presently further obscured by the advance of a dense smoke-like cloud, which, straying from the main army, seems to be moving southward on some mission of its own. Then the clouds part again, and over the eastern bluff of the mountain is to be seen a bright vision of green and gold, the oasis on the desert of rock and heath, that tells of the presence of Strathbran. Far away in the west the jagged edge of the Coolins can be seen at intervals, fretting the sky, and the islands of Rona and Raasay floating in a sea of haze. Opposite, between Moruisg and Sgurr a' Chaoruinn, the blue blackness of the retreating rain-cloud has a very awesome appearance, and, as it shows no signs of brightening, we gladly turn our gaze towards the blue waters of Loch Maree, where they break from their mountain fastness below Talladale.

While this marvellous panorama is passing slowly before us an hour or more has slipped rapidly away. We are now reminded of the flight of time and the necessity of continuing

our journey without further delay by the advance of a second storm more threatening even than the first. So we clatter down the scree slopes on the further or western side of the summit, and presently reach the famous Spidean nam Fasarinen, the weathered pinnacles on the crest of the ridge that present so fantastic an appearance from below. To climb over these one by one is an exercise in gymnastics which may be recommended to everyone who cares for good rock climbing; but probably most members of the Club will find sufficient sensation in the easier route that winds brokenly round their base. Half an hour's hard scrambling carried us over most of the difficulties, and then, a tempting gully presenting itself, someone counselled a descent, without including the remaining, or Torridon summit, Mullach an Rathain (the ridge of the horns, 3356). The suggestion was adopted, and, with infinite difficulty, for the slopes are tremendously steep and broken, we descended into Glen Torridon, four miles west of Allt a' Choire Dhuibh Mhoir, and ten, by the road, from our quarters at Kinlochewe.

Of the remaining mountains in the group it is impossible to treat at length within the compass of this paper. Beinn Alligin (the jewel mountain, 3232) may be easily ascended from Torridon, where its black, massive crags, plunging straight into the depths of Coire Mhic Nobuil, have a grim and forbidding appearance, not easily forgotten by one who has seen them in a day of storm, with the mist seething and eddying in the Toll a' Mhadaidh (the wolf's hole); or if Gairloch be the starting point, the ascent may be made by Lochs Bhealaich and Toll na Beiste by an excellent bridle path which runs from Shieldaig to within three miles of its base. Beinn Dearg (the red hill, 2995) is accessible from the same points and by much the same routes; while of Baosbheinn (the hill of faces, 2869) and Beinn an Eoin (the hill of birds, 2801) it is enough to say that they can be ascended almost anywhere on the Gairloch side if spring or early summer be the season selected. Later in the year the adventurous climber will find his movements as closely watched by the keepers as those of the deer, whose shrine these mountains then are.