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HILL-CLIMBING IN SKYE.

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THE pastime of mountain-climbing, as cultivated within the boundaries of our own island, is of fairly recent date. There are yet among the living those whose names are recorded as the first to ascend the prominent heights which originally attracted the attention of the climber. It is in truth only within the last dozen years that this form of exercise has taken such dimensions as to rank among the recognised modes of physical sport, and to gather round itself a literary record. Stimulated, perhaps, in the first instance by its predecessor, Alpine-climbing, mountaineering in Britain has now achieved an independent existence, has its own increasing band of votaries, has its journals, and is now in a fair way to have its handbooks. Season after season sees an increased number of youngsters and oldsters gathering in the familiar resorts, still all too few, where the sport can be enjoyed in its utmost perfection. There is a climbing jargon, and a tiresome climbing talk, and, as in all other forms of physical enjoyment to which the British mind has given itself, a thirst for "records", "first ascents", and "new ways", which bids fair soon to leave no corner of the narrow field unexplored.

An amusement which has so definitely established itself might afford to ignore all pertinacious criticism or demands for justification, and might shelter itself under the fair plea that in its case, as in the case of other forms of physical enjoyment, it is difficult or impossible to convey to the out-

sider any impression that would correspond to the experience of those who love it, and that would render the pursuit of it intelligible. The cultivated foreigner has often put on record his total failure to comprehend the eagerness of actors or spectators in a vigorous game of cricket or football. The non-golfer—who is about to vanish from the face of the earth—finds it hard to appreciate the keenness of enjoyment to be derived from trying, with what seem ingeniously awkward instruments, to knock a little ball into a little hole in the ground. Our ancestors, who looked at hills with positive aversion and loathing, could hardly enter into the feelings of their descendants to whom the rugged mountains are things of beauty, and who cannot obtain too close and intimate an acquaintance with them; and such ancestors have many descendants. Yet one might fairly urge for mountain-climbing that it is not in one but in many conditions, and in the combination of them, that the secret of its fascination is to be found. The mere delight of physical exercise is one condition—and a good day's climbing is about as hard work as a day with pick and shovel—but it cannot be taken in isolation; no climber wants simply to fatigue himself. There is a large infusion of that "spirited" element which is never long absent from our active relation to nature; there is a positive satisfaction in overcoming obstacles. But, apart from all that, independent even to some extent of an accompaniment which may be had without the climbing—the natural beauty of the surroundings—it has to be said that only through the experience of climbing is it possible to realise fully and to enjoy thoroughly the impression which the grandeur of the lonely and rugged mountain cliffs makes upon the mind. One needs to be close at hand, in the very heart of the great shattered masses of a real mountain, to appreciate fully what they mean for us.

"Useless and dangerous" are the hard terms with which the amusement is too often condemned. Hardly "useless", for the sport has its educative side, not only in regard to taste, but also to morals. There is much good discipline in climbing. "Know thyself" is an early and an excellent moral

precept, and nowhere does it apply more forcibly than in the work of climbing. "Dangerous" the amusement may be made, if carelessly and rashly undertaken. But in our own country, where there have not to be reckoned with the many incalculable elements of peril from weather that constitute the real source of danger in climbing on the larger scale, the risks run are more imaginary than real. A man may run much more risk in walking down a crowded street in town than in climbing a gully. As yet the record of mountaineering in Britain is singularly free from all that would justify the condemnation of it as dangerous. The accidents which are on record have not, for the most part, occurred in climbing. Where there have been accidents in climbing, it would appear that the ordinary and well-understood precautions, in the absence of which climbing is wholly unjustifiable, had been neglected.

For the full enjoyment of mountain-climbing there is requisite a certain co-relation between the mountains to be climbed and the headquarters of the climber. In this respect it can hardly be said that Scotland, considering its abundance of mountain material, is well equipped. The Lake district, and in particular the Wastdale portion of it, is almost ideally satisfactory. The best hills, with an immense quantity of varied and excellent climbing—Pillar Mountain, with its famous Rock and its appendages, Great Gable, with Needle, several fine *arêtes*, and a precipitous face amply stocked with gullies, Scawfell, with a plethora of climbing opportunities—are clustered round the Wastdale Inn and within easy reach of it. North Wales, again, has its Pen-y-gwryd Inn, from which Crib Goch, the ridges of Snowdon, and the fine mountain range of the Glyders are of easy access. For practical, or climbing, purposes, these two districts, Snowdon and the English Lakes, exhaust the material south of the Border. In Scotland, it is certainly true that two of the best quarters are excellently supplied. Skye, which so far as climbing is concerned is *facile princeps* in Scotland at least, has the admirable inn at Sligachan, from which a large section of the Coolin Hills can be managed, and it is possible, I believe, to make such

arrangements, through the excellent and most helpful proprietor of that inn, for the more outlying and perhaps grander section to be undertaken with equal comfort. Arran, which in smaller compass offers a very fair amount of excellent rock-climbing, somewhat resembling what is to be had in Skye, has in the hotel at Corrie a first-rate headquarters for the climber. But there must be an immense quantity of good climbing ground from which one is debarred by the brute factor of distance from the centre of operations. The Cairngorms, *e.g.*, contain much that looks like good field for climbing. There is a fine rocky face extending from Cairngorm to Creag na Leacainn; the head of Glen Avon has good things in it; and the whole eastern face of Braeriach and Cairn Toul, from the Garachorry to the Devil's Point, is, I suppose, practically unexplored by the climber, and looks as if it might give him occupation for a week. Yet most of this is out of reach for want of some fairly near headquarters. The Shelter Stone does not deserve more than its title.

Perhaps it is by reason of these difficulties that, on the whole, and without ignoring the enthusiasm and admirable work of Scottish clubmen, one must think that there is a less general interest taken in mountain climbing in Scotland than in England. The pastime does not seem to have taken hold to the same extent of the Scottish youth. In this observation I may be in error, for I have not had many opportunities of judging, and perhaps I am building too much on the isolated experience of Skye. Although climbers were not unknown at the Sligachan Inn, they were not numerous, and they were not predominately Scottish. There were no evidences of such periodical aggregations of the climbing fraternity as take place at Wastdale and throughout the Lake district. Yet, nowhere in Great Britain is the pastime to be enjoyed under such perfect conditions as in Skye, good weather being postulated. From the excellent centre of operations, the inn at Sligachan, the climber has within easy reach—that is, within a moderate day's walk—a range and variety of climbing unequalled elsewhere. The character of the rock

lends itself to climbing. The rough, firm surface of the slabs renders possible ascents at an angle which, under less favourable conditions, would be impracticable or intolerably difficult. There is almost every possible grade of difficulty to be selected, and every ascent is "remunerative" in the fullest sense; that is, it affords ample sense of exercise and conquest of obstacles, and the result is worth having on its own account. It is impossible to imagine any kind of walking more exhilarating than that along the sharp ridges of the Coolin Hills. All around, and close at hand, are towering peaks, deep corries, and shattered edges of marvellous rock. From these the eye travels to the broad expanse of sea glittering in the sun, broken into many a sinuous arm, and studded with islands. The picture is closed and completed by the endless prospect of the blue mountain tops of the mainland and the Hebrides, a billowy mass of hills amid which distinct recognition of the isolated mountain forms gradually becomes impossible.

From Sligachan the climbing ground divides naturally into three main sections—(1) Sgurr nan Gillean with its ridges and appendages, Sgur-na-h-Uamha and the Bhas-teir; (2) the peaks and ridges surrounding the head of Coire na Creiche, beginning with Bruach na Frithe and extending to Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh; and (3) Blath Bheinn (Blaven). On Sgurr nan Gillean much has been done, and doubtless much yet remains to be done. Of the recognised climbs the best in many ways is the ascent by the Pinnacle Route along the north-east spur, an ascent excellently described in the second number of this Journal. The western ridge to Bhas-teir is also an admirable climb, giving a considerable variety of work, and there is good climbing to be had by proceeding along the long south-eastern ridge connecting the top of Sgurr nan Gillean with its characteristically shaped appendage Sgur-na-h-Uamha. The ascent of this latter peak, the cone projecting into Harta Corrie, if made from the Corrie, is hard. At least we found it so, when selecting for path the right hand of two deep gullies seen from the Corrie about half-way up the peak.

If the ridge from Bruach na Frithe be followed faithfully all the way round the head of Coire na Creiche, there is perhaps more than can be managed comfortably in an ordinary day. But it breaks into portions which can be allotted to separate expeditions, and it may interest future visitors to the locality to have a brief description of what is to be encountered on these. From Bruach na Frithe the main ridge to be followed is exceedingly interesting and presents for some time no great difficulty. There is a considerable dip, and some small pinnacles to be got over which lead gradually on to what has been in view all along the ridge, the first of two higher peaks with a rather sharp cleft between them. These peaks, I understand, are to be known as Bidein Druim nan Ramh, Druim nan Ramh itself being the long, rather less elevated ridge going off from them on the left hand, and forming part of the rocky walls of Lota Corrie and Harta Corrie. The first and lower of the peaks, taken from either side of the ridge, that is, either coming from or going to Bruach na Frithe, presents no difficulty; and I may say that nothing but trouble is to be gained by avoiding the top of the ridge. On one occasion, coming up Bruach na Frithe by the sloping ridge on the side of Coire na Creiche, we thought time might be gained by breaking off before the final ascent to Bruach na Frithe, and traversing the side of the cliffs to Bidein. Time was not gained, and the climb proved hard and unpleasing.

The ascent from the first peak to the second is harder, and has to be accomplished by keeping slightly to the right hand at the final portion. The ascent is more easy to make than the descent, when the walk is made in the reverse direction. The difficulty in ascending is seen. When descending, it is not at once apparent from the top of the peak, which is a small superficies, how the thing is to be managed. It is necessary to let one's self down over the edge on the left corner of the top plateau before the remainder of the way becomes visible. If the rocks were wet, or if it were misty and dark, the climb would not be easy.

The descent from the second peak to the cleft on the ridge, a cleft which, from a peculiar rock in it, is, I imagine, that named on the Ordnance maps Bealach an Clach Mhor, is somewhat sharp, and of it also it is to be said that the climb is easier when taken in the reverse direction. From the cleft, the walk may be continued, homewards or onwards, in a variety of directions. Turning to the left, and skirting the base of the peak descended, we may take on to the long ridge of Druim nan Ramh, which has some remarkable and exercising pinnacles upon it, and the first main section of which terminates in an abrupt, shattered, precipitous rock face, on which, at the close of a day, we did not feel inclined to try our fortunes. It looked impracticable, and we decided that it must be so. Looking from below, after we had rounded the base of this wall, we thought the descent might have been made by the shattered edge on the Coruisk side. The descent towards Harta Corrie may be made by one or other of several chimneys leading on to the lower storey of the hillside. From experience I recommend that the climber proceed a good distance along Druim nan Ramh before taking down. He will thus avoid the watery slabs visible from the top of Harta Corrie. They are tiresome to get over, and, I think, more dangerous, or, at least, more suggestive of danger, than even much steeper rock.

If a more direct return to Sligachan is desired, the narrow and excessively stony gully to the right (Coire na Creiche) side of the cleft may be descended. At the foot of it a rather indefinitely marked track strikes away along the side of the slope of Bruach na Frithe, and leads into the better marked path from Sligachan to Glen Brittle at the highest point reached before the descent into Coire na Creiche.

If the ridge be continued, there is a sharp ascent from the cleft. Two or three steps up, on the left hand of the exact edge, lead on to a sloping slab, which has to be crossed. There is no particular difficulty in effecting this, either ascending or descending, but in the latter case it looks less practicable; and when the rock is wet, as it too often is, the

rope is advisable, at all events, in descending. From the slab upwards is fairly straight forward. The climber is now on the ridge of Sgurr a' Mhadaidh,* and may complete his survey of that member of the group by traversing its four fine peaks. There is good climbing on them all, but nothing to call for special remark; and, indeed, as a rule, the descriptions of the ascent of these Skye peaks have a certain monotony. Perhaps it is that as yet only the more obvious climbs have been made, and that the minute description of special difficulties and ways of accomplishing them, with which Lake district climbing has familiarised one, must wait until the ground has been more thoroughly traversed.

Sgurr a' Mhadaidh may be reached either as thus described, or from Coire na Creiche by ascending either side of the short ridge which separates the head of the Corrie into two, or by the fine shattered ridge of Sgurr Thuilm, the southern boundary of the Corrie. We found the climb from the corner at which the latter joins the main ridge very good as a mode of beginning the traverse of the peaks of Sgurr a' Mhadaidh in the reverse direction. When the ridge of Sgurr Thuilm is reached it leads straight on, and by a fine *arête* to a peak, which, from the presence of a tin box en-

* The minute topography of the Coolins is only in its infancy, and the Ordnance map is very confusing in regard to the peaks just referred to. My friend Professor Weiss and I spent some time in trying to clear up the topography of the Bealach an Clach Mhor, and I insert here part of a note we entered in the Climbing Book at Sligachan. "The southern or third pinnacle, separated from the main ridge by the natural arch described by Mr. Pilkington (probably the Bealach an Clach Mhor of the Ordnance Survey), is practically the highest point of the ridge projecting into Coire na Creiche. In Mr. Pilkington's revised map of the Coolins, this ridge is not joined to the southern or any of the peaks of the main ridge, on account of the name of the mountain occupying the space. In the diagrammatic view by Mr. Gibson, however (*Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal*), this ridge, the middle prong, is connected to the central peak, which is obviously incorrect". This southern peak, then, must be regarded as one of Bidein Druim nan Ramh. The four peaks of Sgurr a' Mhadaidh lie further south along the main ridge. I am not able to reconcile our observation of this quarter with the list of successive summits and dips given by Dr. Collie (*S. M. C. J.*, Jan. 1893).

closing cards, we thought must be regarded as the highest of the four heads.

Blaven, which stands apart from the main group of the Coolin Hills, is an impressive hill from whatsoever point it is viewed. It towers up majestically when the approach to the island is made from the north by sea. From Loch Slapin it presents a wonderfully fine serrated top, and the long, steep, rocky face it presents to Glen Sligachan is seen to great advantage either from Druim na Eidhne (Drumhain) or on the walk to Camasunary. In its structure Blaven seems to combine features of the Coolins proper with those of the very dissimilar hills so curiously located by the side of them. Its rock is not so firm and uniform. Every now and again in climbing one comes upon a seam of more friable broken stuff, which affords by no means such excellent footing as the grey black slabs of the adjacent peaks. Possibly the hill has special interest for the geologist.

The most direct route to the top of Blaven is by the huge, perpendicular-looking cleft running from top to bottom of the long side facing Drumhain. The lower portion of this cleft, perhaps two-thirds of the whole height, is a succession of waterfalls, some of which, whether water is there or not, seem impracticable. The general angle of ascent is very steep, and the frequent necessity of climbing out to the cliffs on the side of these waterfalls makes the labour excessive. They may be avoided by keeping out on the main slope near the edge of the cleft, but even then the ascent is tiresome. The upper portion of the cleft is a long stone shoot, with smooth rock sides, up which the "going" is certainly possible, but as certainly tedious and irritating. The cleft ought to be kept for descending, and there is indeed another reason for recommending that Blaven should not be ascended from this side. The approach to the finest portion of the mountain, from the climber's point of view, the huge rocky protuberance on its north-east spur, called Clach Glas, is not so well made from the main bulk as by ascending the ridge itself on which Clach Glas is situated, or by following the spur which runs off from Garbh Bheinn and joins Marsco.

Clach Glas is a very fine mass of rock, in full view from the inn at Sligachan, and resembling, as one might fancifully imagine, a gigantic figure with a long robe drawn up around its ears. Perhaps it hardly deserves its local reputation as a supremely difficult piece of rock climbing. In its case, as in the case of some other of the Skye peaks, the appearance is worse than the reality. We approached it from the hollow made by the sweep of the ridge from Blaven round towards Marsco. Turning into this hollow some six miles up the valley from the Sligachan Inn at a small wooden hut, we first ascended, keeping to the right hand, a long stretch of steep heathery ground which gradually led into the rounded, rocky ravine or corrie forming the portion of the hollow more immediately under the ridge of Clach Glas. From this corrie two fairly well marked gullies lead upwards. The left hand one proved unexpectedly hard, and we were glad to get out of it on to the edge of the main slope. From this point we aimed straight for the edge of Clach Glas on our left hand. The rocks looked more formidable than they proved to be in reality, and there was no trouble in getting to the top except from the need of extra care when the more friable and insecure seams were encountered. From the top of Clach Glas we continued the ridge to the summit of Blaven. The sharpest of several descents met on this ridge was the first, that from the peak of Clach Glas itself. We chose the descent by the right hand of the edge, which leads to a point a little below the level of the ridge to be reached. It seemed to us, after reaching the ridge, that the descent to the left would have been at least equally practicable and more direct. But as we did not put this to the test of experiment the idea may be only a case of the frequent illusion that the road on the other side of the valley is the better. The rocks on the ridge and on Blaven itself are much more broken up and "weathered" than is the case on the Coolin range.

Blaven may not, perhaps, deserve to be placed in the first rank for climbing purposes, but its claims are strong

on other grounds. It is a most imposing hill in appearance; its stretching ridge affords admirable walking; and from no other hill is a finer view of the characteristic excellences of Skye scenery to be obtained. The sole objection to it is the length of the rough walk that has to be undertaken in order to bring it within reach.

