

SGURR DEARG AND THE INACCESSIBLE
PINNACLE.

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A WEEK'S climbing in drenching rain and clinging impenetrable mist—broken only by one beautiful day on Blaven—had rewarded our visit to Skye in the beginning of August, 1894. The weather was bad even for Sligachan, but we had stuck to our work, regarding our daily soaking merely as part of the ordinary programme, and putting in our dismal ten or twelve hours a day without a murmur. But after Brown had driven off into the darkness of that abominable Saturday night, and left me to the bitterness of my lonely reflections, matters rapidly became worse. Such climatic hardships as we had experienced in common might have befallen us on any part of the west coast. They had no purely local characteristics. But I was now to learn what Skye really can do when it sets about making a display of water-works in earnest. The result is not rain. No metaphor which goes on that assumption—not even that one which tells of proving Skye terriers—can convey any idea of it. "The fountains of the great deep were broken up and the windows of heaven were opened . . . and the waters prevailed greatly upon the earth". For three days not a soul could stir beyond the hotel door. Waterproof was a term of derision; climbing and drowning were for the time being used as synonyms in the strictest sense of the word. But this kind of thing cannot go on indefinitely, even in Skye; and just as I had resolved to run all risks rather than remain longer inactive, the change came—in time, as I verily believe, to save me from a watery grave.

The morning was clear and cold, when John Mackenzie, one of the local guides, and I started on our 15 mile drive to Glen Brittle House. That drive, if it did nothing else, enables me to point a moral to those who may think of visiting Sgurr Dearg. This moral is summed up in the one word, *Walk!* That is, walk openly and avowedly, and

make no parade of hiring a conveyance. Otherwise, after driving and walking turn about for an hour and a half, you will be disgusted to see yawning in front of you the great opening of Coire na Creiche, and to realise that by taking the well-known pony track you could have reached the same point within the hour on foot.

The ascent of Sgurr Dearg begins immediately behind Glen Brittle House, and leads at first over soft, grassy slopes which come upon one as a pleasant surprise in the midst of the rugged Coolins. But, further on, the grass slopes are succeeded by the usual outcrop of smooth, slabby rock, lying in many places at an angle sufficiently sharp to necessitate the use of hands as well as feet, and to impose upon the climber the advisability of carefully picking his way. When once the ridge of the mountain is reached, however, things become decidedly easier. The ridge is broad and not at all steep, and, although considerably broken up, forms throughout a safe and simple walk. Indeed, although Sgurr Dearg, with its altitude of 3255 feet to the top of the Pinnacle, is the second highest mountain in Skye (the west peak of Sgurr Alisdair, 3275 feet, being the highest), it is also one of the tamest and least interesting. Even its height gives it no sense of grandeur such as occasionally impresses one in the case of much lower peaks, and what fame it has it owes almost entirely to the presence of that singular freak of nature, the so-called "Inaccessible Pinnacle" or "Old Man of Skye".

This striking object appeared suddenly before us at the distance of a few yards as we topped the highest point of the main ridge of the mountain. On this side it is of no great height, but as it loomed up before us out of the mist it looked at first view uncompromising enough to satisfy the most ultramontane of tastes. A very good description of the Pinnacle appeared in Vol. II. (page 134) of the Journal of the Scottish Mountaineering Club, and the following sentences, which I quote from that article, may serve to give an idea of what it is like. "The pinnacle of Sgurr Dearg, variously called the Inaccessible and the Old Man of Skye, may be seen by the most unobservant on a

clear day from a considerable distance, forming a distinct top to its mountain: and resembling, as Sheriff Nicholson tells us in one of his admirable articles on the scenery and climbing of Skye, from some points a huge horn, and other points a chimney can. It stands quite alone, having no companion points or ridge of rock, and is a survival of the fittest of the range, being a hard slab of trap which has more successfully than the rest of the mountain withstood the weathering action of the elements. It is fixed into the east side of the mountain summit, its western end forming a point topping the mountain, while running down to the east a long sloping edge falls for some hundreds of feet at a somewhat similar inclination to the mountain side, until, becoming more steep, it terminates in the mountain side. Mr. Clinton Dent, in an article on the 'Rocky Mountains of Skye' (*A.J.*, 112, p. 422), very aptly likens it to a comb stuck in the middle of a hair-brush for convenience of packing".

It was the perpendicular western end of the pinnacle that faced us as we reached the top of the mountain, and we attacked it on this side without loss of time. As I have indicated, it is quite a short climb. The only difficulty consists in passing a sloping slab about half-way up. This slab rises from about the level of one's shoulder, and as it offers no hold for the fingers it is necessary in surmounting it to depend very largely on the resistance to a rapid descent offered by the power of friction. After the slab is negotiated there is no further trouble. I do not think this place would offer any particular difficulty in ordinary circumstances, but those in which we were now placed can hardly be described by such an adjective as "ordinary". My old fortune still pursued me with dogged persistency. The weather had again broken down, and it was now blowing a gale from the north, which drove along before it stinging blasts of hail, sleet, and snow. The consequence was that the rock face streamed with water, and this, with the force of the wind made any attempt at adhesion by friction a proceeding not quite devoid of risk. Still as the ascent had to be made, I climbed up to the highest foothold below the

above-mentioned slab, and stood waiting there for the wind to moderate so that I might make a dash for the top. But ten minutes of this sort of thing was as much as I could endure. I had come away without my gloves, and the hail, beating on my bare hands, soon numbed them to such an extent that all feeling left them. I accordingly had to descend, and put in a period of vigorous shoulder-slapping, in the style generally approved and adopted by members of the cab-driving profession, with the view of restoring the circulation in my powerless fingers. This having been partially accomplished, another attempt was made, but with the same result. Whenever I got above the protecting ridge of the mountain, the wind and the sleet swept down on me, and I again retired, reluctantly, almost angrily indeed, but this time convinced that the idea of climbing the west side of the pinnacle in such weather was out of the question.

However, the eastern edge still was left to us, and to it we accordingly transferred our attentions. This eastern edge, while not so steep as the western face, is very much longer, and offers a far more sensational climb. The whole of the ridge is exceedingly narrow and falls off on both sides with great steepness. But, fortunately, the rock is fairly good; while the ridge had been so thoroughly cleaned by previous climbers that we did not meet with a single dangerously loose or unreliable hold on the whole ascent. In fact, the climb is one of comparative ease, and even on the narrowest, which is also the most perpendicular part of the ridge there should be no difficulty to a man with a good head. Our method of procedure was for me to climb to the full extent of our 60-foot rope, and then, anchoring myself and hitching the rope over some projecting knob, to nullify the effect of a possible slip, to pull in the slack as my companion ascended. In ordinary weather this slow process would not have been at all necessary; indeed, the rope could quite well be dispensed with altogether. But with the wind blowing a hurricane, and at times threatening to throw us off the ridge altogether, it was desirable to adopt every precaution.

The halt on the summit of the pinnacle was a miser-

able business. As the ascent of the western side had proved impracticable, I was all the more anxious to descend by it. So we sat crushed into a niche near the top for more than an hour waiting for the weather to give us a chance. But the only result was that the driving sleet wet us to the skin. And when at last John, who evidently did not like the idea of descending the long eastern edge in such weather, asked me to lower him past the awkward slab on the western face, I was unable to face the responsibility. My hands by this time were like miniature boxing gloves in appearance, and not at all fitted to withstand any great strain on the thin rope. As John was in as bad a condition for assisting me as I was for helping him we found ourselves driven to the longer route.

As we began the descent we were delighted by the appearance of one of those beautiful phenomena, which at rare intervals, surprise and gladden the eye of the mountaineer. Long before we had reached the top of Sgurr Dearg the mist had blotted out of view everything beyond the range of a few yards. But, for the last few minutes, the dim and watery sun had been making a desperate effort to pierce the gloom; and now, just as I was standing on the edge of the pinnacle, preparing to follow my companion, who was some thirty feet below, I suddenly saw my own figure boldly silhouetted on the curtain of mist to my left. The shadow was surrounded by a series of concentric circles glowing in all the rich prismatic colouring of the rainbow. John looked up at my shout, and saw that he also was glorified. The vision lasted for about half a minute, and then gradually and slowly faded away, only, however, to return in a few seconds more brilliantly beautiful though also more evanescent than before. It was the first time either of us had seen such a sight, and we remained a long time standing where we were in the hope that the vision would be repeated, but in vain. Each of us saw his own figure only, that of his companion being invisible.

This beautiful and interesting sight was followed by a rapid breaking up of the ocean of mist to the south and west. In a few minutes, out of the gloom that had en-

compassed them for hours, shot suddenly the black craggy peaks that encircle the head of wild Corrie Labain. It was a most impressive spectacle to watch the white mist, torn into shreds by the furious wind, eddying and whirling round the great gaunt precipices in that suggestive partial revelation which adds such an infinity of grandeur to the finest mountains, and can impart a feeling of dignity and bulk even to the humblest hills.

Our further progress towards the base of the pinnacle was saddened to me by the loss of an old and faithful companion. A sudden upward movement of the knee jerked my good old briar out of my jacket pocket. A single bound was sufficient to carry it far beyond the possibility of recovery, and much I lamented its loss before I got back to the hotel. Otherwise our descent was accomplished without incident, and when we once more set foot upon the solid mountain side it was with the feeling that, if we had not done all we intended, we had, considering the circumstances, put in a fairly successful day, and stored up one more pleasant memory for the days that were to come.

The drive home is *not* a pleasant memory. Wet, cold, pipeless, the alternate driving and walking over those wretched fifteen miles was a miserable experience. But all the more on that account, the enjoyment got out of the usual rubber as we sat round the fire in the smoking room that night was, mayhap, greater than if the expedition had been blessed with the most glorious of weather.