

## THE FANNICH HILLS.

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A KEEN desire to explore the Fannichs, kindled to some extent by the charm of their distinctive title, "The Ross-shire Alps", had long possessed us. Partly, too, the fact that nowhere could we discover any very detailed information regarding them, formed an attraction, and a visit to them promised, therefore, to have all the glamour of complete novelty, as well as to afford the satisfaction of exploring mountains which had been deemed worthy of an Alpine designation.

In truth, however, it must be said that the title, "The Ross-shire Alps", is, strictly speaking, somewhat a misnomer. For the Fannichs are situated not in the county of Ross, but in one of these patches of Cromarty with which the face of that county was variegated, and which are now united with it to form the new county of Ross and Cromarty. Nor can the Fannichs be claimed as the highest hills in the united counties, although Sgùrr Mòr (3637), the highest summit of the group, was also the loftiest peak in the old county of Cromarty. But in many ways, as we shall see, the Fannichs are a notable group, and well deserve a distinctive name, such as fancy has already applied to them.

The dearth of exact information about Fannich is explained to some extent by the want of any very near hotel accommodation. Achanalt and Achnasheen are the nearest inns, and lodging may sometimes be had at Lochluichart station, which is about eight miles from the nearest of the hills and from which there is a fairly good driving road to Fannich Lodge. On the occasion of our visit, however, we were fortunate in securing, through an introduction, quarters with the forester at Fannich Lodge, which is situated close to the edge of Loch Fannich, a loch about seven miles long, lying to the south and just at the base of the group.

It was a magnificently bright afternoon in the end of

May when we left the train at Lochluichart station, and the blue sky deluded us into (as it proved) a vain forecast of the perfect weather we were to enjoy! But that afternoon at least was perfect, and as we marched along the road which winds alongside the Fannich, or Grudie, river and leads past Aultdearg on to Loch Fannich we were full of bright anticipations. On our way we made a slight divergence, about two miles from the station, to see the waterfall on the Grudie, known as Rory's Leap, where the river, here of considerable volume, breaks through its rocky channel into a picturesque fall about ten feet high. Leaving the falls, a few miles of the road were quickly left behind, and after passing Aultdearg we were soon confronted by the rocky corrie (Garbh Choire Mòr, known locally as "the old wife's corrie") of An Eigin (the hill of distress), which forms the eastern outpost of the Fannich group. Seen from the road this corrie has a most imposing appearance and gives an impression of difficulty which makes the name of the hill not ill deserved. But, as we afterwards found, its appearance in this respect is somewhat deceptive. Winding round the base of An Eigin we were soon in full view of the loch, with, in the background, the graceful outline of Fionn Bheinn (3060), which lies on the southern side of the loch directly opposite to the western division of the Fannichs.

On our arrival at the Lodge dinner was speedily discussed, and although it was then wearing on to six o'clock, the evening was too fine and the hills were too inviting to permit us to rest. An Coileachan (the little cock), a hill just over the 3000 feet level (3014) and the nearest of the group, was, after deliberation, selected as the point of attack. From the loch the ascent seemed a short and easy one, but as we mounted ridge after ridge and crossed plateau after plateau we were gradually undeceived. At last after a climb of almost exactly 2200 feet (the loch lies at an altitude of 822), which we did in an hour and twenty minutes, the cairn was reached, and the view well repaid the unexpected exertion. The sky was still clear, and both the near and the distant views were distinct and well defined. On the east and close at hand was An Eigin, which is really a spur

of An Coileachan, and further east we could see the dark waters of Loch Luichart winding through the heather. At our feet was Loch Fannich itself, bounded close to the south by a range of hills of most disappointing height when viewed from the eminence we had reached, but with range upon range of magnificent tops in the background; and to the west we could easily distinguish nearly all the more notable of the Fannich peaks. Near us and almost in line were Meall Gorm (2998), and Meallan Rairigidh (3109), and further on was the rocky summit of Sgùrr Mòr. Further off still was what may be called the western range of the Fannichs (although even beyond them on the west there lies Sgùrr Breac and A' Chailleach (3275) the extremity of the group), embracing, in their order from the loch side, Torran Ruadh (1658), Sgùrr a' Chadha Dheirg, Sgùrr nan Each (the horse's peak, 3026), and Sgùrr nan Clach Geala (the peak of the white stones, 3581). Càrn na Crìche (3148), which lies at the head of Coire Mòr, the corrie between this range and Sgùrr Mòr, was not visible, but to the north-west the long, grey, peakless ridge of the expressively-named Beinn Liath Mhòr Fannaich filled up the near landscape. Among the distant hills was, of course, Ben Wyvis, and on the north-west was the huge mass of the Ross-shire Ben Dearg (3547), with its peaked dependency. But what struck us most in the distant view was the castellated outline of Slioch (3217-3260), rising abruptly from the shores of Loch Maree, with the white evening mist just touching its highest ridges, and more to the south-west the black rocky wall of Beinn Eighe and his neighbours in Torridon.

We halted long on An Coileachan, but at last the descent was reluctantly made by dipping westward into Coire Riabhaich (the speckled corrie), one of the three large corries which extend from the loch into the group. The other two, Coire Beag and Coire Mòr, branch more to the west, Coire Mòr running right up, as has been said, to Càrn na Crìche, while Coire Beag runs up towards Meallan Rairigidh, being flanked on the east by Creag a' Coire Riabhaich, which divides it, on the other hand, from the corrie of that name.

Next day the barometer had fallen, and even the near tops were invisible in the early morning. A start was made, however, about nine o'clock, and taking the deerstalker's path from the lodge we determined to make for Sgùrr Mòr. The track winds up Creag a' Coire Riabhaich, and is well marked until about 2000 feet. Along its course crystals of an amethyst colour, pretty, but of no intrinsic value, are occasionally picked up. At Cadh' a' Bhàillidh (the Baillie's gate), a sort of "sneck" connecting Creag a' Coire Riabhaich and Meallan Rairigidh, the path becomes intermittent, and continues so to the top of the Meallan. From Cadh' a' Bhàillidh we saw the full extent of the long ridgy back of An Coileachan, which had seemed to us on the previous evening so short an incline. Near the top of Meallan Rairigidh there is passed a neatly built hut, with a good stove, a convenience we have often wished some kind Providence would set down for the use of travellers on some of our high hills nearer home. By the time we reached Meallan Rairigidh, and had started to make along the ridge by way of Meall nam Peithirean, the hill of the watchers (the height of which is not given on the Ordnance Survey map, but which we made by the aneroid to be about 3200 feet), for Sgùrr Mòr, the mist had risen considerably, and we had good near views. On the north we passed successively Loch Gorm, Loch an Eilein, Loch Li, and Loch an Fhuar Thuill Mhoir (the loch of the big cold hole), all lying to the right in the valley between us and Beinn Liath Mor Fannaich. The tops of Sgùrr Mòr and Sgurr nan Clach were still, however, only to be seen dimly through the mist, and it was, indeed, not till we were actually at the cairn of the former that we realised exactly what manner of hill it was. Here a surprise waited us. We had toiled up the grassy slope on the south-east and had reached the cairn, when a startled exclamation from the foremost of the party, brought the other sharply up. Right beneath us to the north and with its brink not six feet from the cairn, yawned a rocky chasm, at least, as nearly as we could make out, a thousand feet deep. The mist was churning and boiling about us, one moment filling the chasm, the next lifting so

as to show us clearly the extent of the gulf below. On the other side we could now discern the black rocky cliffs of Sgùrr nan Clach (Eagan Tuill Bhig) and Sgùrr nan Each standing boldly out, and the peculiarly diversified characteristics of the Fannichs—their easy grassy slopes on the one hand, and their steep corries, studded with a profusion of black rocky pinnacles, on the other, began to impress themselves strongly upon us. The descent from Sgùrr Mòr to the adjoining eminence of Càrn na Crìche (so called from the fact that the old boundary between Ross and Cromarty crosses its summit) is steep, but it was soon accomplished. Beneath us, and to the north of Càrn na Crìche, was Loch a' Mhadaidh (the foxes' loch, 1830), and further off the green rounded summit of Meall a' Chrasgaidh (3062) and Loch a' Bhraoin, while in the far distance we could distinguish the Atlantic waters of Loch Broom, with its margin of yellow sand, bordered by green cultivated ground.

From Càrn na Crìche our route next lay to Sgùrr nan Clach Geala, a name arising from the numerous white quartz stones with which the prevailing blackness of its rocks is relieved. Here and further along the ridge (Cadha na Geute and Cadh' a' Bhocain), on to Sgùrr nan Each and Sgùrr a' Cadha Dheirg, which are connected by a "sneek" known as Cadha Dearg Mòr, we found the same characteristics as on Sgùrr Mòr—the gradual slope on the one side, and the steep jagged rocks ranging to a thousand feet high on the other. This feature is particularly well marked in Sgùrr nan Clach, the black rocks falling sheer away from the grassy sward at the top. To the west we had good views of Sgùrr Breac and A' Chailleach, and down the corrie, between them and ourselves, the western end of Loch Fannich and "the Nest" (Nedd), a hut near the head of the loch. From Sgùrr nan Clach, too, we could see the bottle-shaped Loch na Shellag in the Dundonnell Forest. From the top of Sgùrr nan Clach we made our way to Sgùrr nan Each, a peak of almost exactly the same type, but of less bulk. Thence, or rather from Cadha Dearg Mòr, we dropped by a somewhat tedious descent, much fore-

shortened in the view from the top, into Coire Mòr, down which we followed the course of the burn (Allt a' Coire Mòr), till within a mile of the point where it joins the loch. Here, opposite Torran Ruadh, hunger drove us to take what seemed to be a short cut for home, and, instead of following the burn down to the loch, and then taking the path along the waterside, we left the stream, and crossed on our way the Allt a' Coire Beag. Thereafter we made in a straight line for our headquarters through a tract of country honey-combed with peat hags and moss pots, the only recommendation of which was that it served as a splendid foil to the admirably smooth hill walking we had experienced in the early part of the day.

All this time the barometer had been steadily falling, and, going to bed that night, we had sorrowful thoughts of the morrow, which even the preliminary tumbler of toddy failed entirely to dispel. And the morning fully justified our prognostications! Everything was shrouded in mist, and a persistent rain was falling. But we determined to defy the elements, and set out by the driving road along the loch side for the rocky corrie of An Eigin, which we had so much admired on our way from Lochluichart. The story goes that one winter seven deer were killed here by being driven over the rocks at the top of the corrie by an old woman with a blanket—hence the local name already mentioned. The fate of the deer, however, did not prevent us from resolving on the ascent, more especially as we had been told that deer, more fortunate than the seven, frequently ascended and descended the corrie, and we knew that wherever deer could go, man could safely venture. In the end, the corrie turned out to be rather disappointing, although its average angle is about 50°. The rocks are certainly steep, but right up to the top, which is at least 1600 feet above the level of the loch, there is a fairly wide passage through which the ascent is made. Little or no "hand and foot" climbing is necessary, indeed the last two or three hundred feet is quite smooth and grassy, a somewhat dangerous bit to negotiate, perhaps, during a dry and hot season, but quite simple in a wet day.

Having safely accomplished this corrie, we made for An Coileachan, the top of which is reached from An Eigin by a very gradual ascent over stony ground. By this time the weather had somewhat improved, and we made the descent to Loch Gorm in high spirits; debating, as we went, the possibility of making our way along the chain of lochs, beginning with Loch Gorm and ending with Loch an Fhuar Thuill Mhor, to the foot of the great corrie of Sgùrr Mòr, and thence making the ascent to the cairn. On arriving at Loch Gorm, however, which is the largest of the chain, and about a mile in circumference, our attention was immediately arrested by a magnificent range of perpendicular pillared rocks, fully a thousand feet high, rising in tiers up from the loch, and forming the north-eastern cliff of Meall Gorm (Creag Dhubh a' Gorm Locha). We at once gave up all thought of Sgùrr Mòr, the more readily as the weather now appeared hopeless, and resolved to try the ascent of Meall Gorm by the rocks. After making our way to the foot of the cliffs round the margin of the loch, or as near it as the rocks, which come right down to the edge of the water, would allow, we chose what M'Connochie proclaimed to be a feasible route, and up we went, hand and foot, to a point about five hundred feet above the level of the loch. Here our progress was checked by a sharp turn which had to be made, with perilously little foot-hold, right above a most uninvitingly steep precipice. It was deemed prudent to retreat, and we descended to the loch at a considerably slower pace than we had ascended. We were determined, however, not to be baulked of our ascent, and veering slightly further round the loch, we came upon a corrie (not named on the Ordnance Survey map, and which has no local name so far as we could gather), which promised some sport. Seen from the foot it seemed to run well up towards the summit of Meall Gorm, but this view gave only a limited conception of its character. The further up we climbed the narrower and deeper it got. At five hundred feet up, or so, it became quite V shaped, excessively steep, in places quite perpendicular, and with only space for one o make the ascent at a time, the rocks on either side over-

hanging at heights ranging from twenty to fifty feet. So bad was it at some places that even the faithful collie, who had hitherto followed us tamely, whined and growled in remonstrance, and had to be literally pushed up in front. We could well believe the foresters afterwards when they told us deer were never known to make the ascent by this pass. Towards the top the corrie widened out, ending in a comparatively easy slope, which led us to the summit. The height of the corrie is about 1200 feet and the average angle about 60°. The difficulty of the ascent was greatly increased by the prevailing rain, which made the rocks most disagreeably wet and slimy. The corrie, however, was clear of snow, therein differing from many of its neighbours.

At the top of the corrie the Meall was swathed in mist. Not one of the surrounding peaks was to be seen, and as the rain now became rather penetrating, we resolved to descend, which we did, for the second time, by Coire Riabhaich, arriving at the lodge in a sadly soaked condition, which necessitated one of the party appearing at dinner in habiliments which, to say the least of them, were more picturesque than appropriate.

Next day the remorseless barometer was lower than ever. But our holiday in Fannich was over. We had arranged to vary our route back by walking over Fionn Bheinn to Achnasheen—how that was accomplished, however, must be another story! It was a raw and cheerless morning as we rowed across the loch, after bidding adieu to our kind hosts, but, as we tried vainly to make out the crested peak of Sgùrr Mòr through the mist, and took our last look at the dark corries of Sgùrr nan Clach, we felt that, despite rain and mist, our exploration of the Fannichs would be remembered as one of our finest and most instructive excursions.