

BEN LAOGHAL.

BY ALLAN CAMERON.

"It's a far cry from Aberdeen to Ben Vorlich" lately wrote the genial chairman of the club, but it is a much farther cry from Aberdeen to Ben Laoghal. This prince of Scottish mountains—for prince it deserves to be called on account of its graceful outline—rears its head almost in the extreme north-west of Scotland. Grierson characterises it as "one of the most picturesque mountains in Scotland", and he was not without experience. Even the "Statistical" writer refers to it in glowing terms, at a time, too, when mountains were not generally considered particularly worthy of attention. He described it as a "noble hill", "the queen of Highland mountains . . . presenting towards its base an expanded breast of two miles in breadth, and cleft at its top into four massy, towering, splintered peaks, standing boldly aloof from each other".

While cycling through the centre of Sutherlandshire in the early days of July, the writer was much impressed by the imposing precipices of a mountain away to the north, and on a nearer approach, so awe-inspiring did they become, that it was determined, if next day were favourable, to make a closer acquaintance with them. Tongue Hotel was made the head-quarters for the night. In that northerly clime, in the height of summer, darkness is slow in coming, and the evening was spent in watching the fine effects of the northern sun on the five conical summits of the mountain, then recognised to be Ben Laoghal (Loyal). Though its highest summit, An Caisteal, is only 2504 feet in height, yet its nearness to the sea, and its "splendid isolation", render it the most imposing natural feature of a very fascinating neighbourhood.

Next morning opened brightly, not a cloud obscured the sky, and everything betokened a glorious day. Consulting

a guide-book, I learned that the Ben was eight miles due south, and inaccessible from the Tongue side. A good road runs direct from the hotel almost to the base, and the eight miles were soon cycled over, and the machine left at a shepherd's cottage nestling at the base of the mountain. The guide-book was right; the summit facing Tongue was found to be a mass of almost perpendicular rock, rising to an altitude of nearly 2400 feet. None of the Cairngorm precipices looks so terrible as this towering mass, its height seemingly increased by its narrowness. This peak, like the others, tapered upwards, its summit a rocky platform of a very limited extent. I made the ascent by keeping this precipice on the right, making the best of the way up the grassy slopes. The incline was exceedingly steep, hands as well as feet having to be used. However, a steep climb has its advantages, compared to a long trudge over gentle slopes, and in two hours after leaving the hotel, I stood on the summit of the first peak. About a quarter of a mile due south rose An Caisteal.* The dip between was not deep, half an hour only being required to cover the distance. The day had fulfilled its early promise; the air was perfectly clear, and in every direction the view was unobstructed. Wind there was none, and the short time at disposal was occupied in locating the mountain peaks of this beautiful but desolate county. A glance over the rock facing southwards was enough to make one shudder. Sheer down went the precipice, an unbroken wall seemingly as great as that towering northwards. This was the precipice seen on the previous day while speeding along the shores of Loch Laoghal. On the summit were numerous pot-holes, perfectly circular and almost polished. They were very similar to those on Ben Avon, the largest being about 18 inches in diameter and elbow-deep with water. On account

* "On looking at Ben Laoghal from this quarter [Loch Laoghal—on the east], that part of it called the castle is seen, but no more of its peaks; and its appearance accounts for the name, for as viewed, from this side, it is surmounted by notches resembling those embrasures made for cannon in fortifications".—Grierson's "Autumnal Rambles among the Scottish Mountains", 3rd ed., 1856.

of the isolated position of the mountain, the view was very extensive. Directly west rose Ben Hope (3040), presenting a huge semicircular corrie towards Ben Laoghal. South-westward, a range terminating in Ben Hee (2864) closed the view in that direction. Twenty-four miles south-west towered Ben More Assynt (3273); while the view to the south was blocked by a long mountain wall, prominent on which were Ben Dearg (3547) (still snow-patched), and Ben Wyvis (3429). Almost exactly south, and twelve miles away, rose the huge mass of Beinn Cleith-bric (3154). This mountain occupies the centre of Sutherlandshire, and is on the direct road between Lairg and Tongue. Away to the east rose the twin summits—Ben Griam Mhor and Ben Griam Bheag, much resembling the Fife Lomonds in shape and relative position, but considerably higher. Morven (2313), some thirty miles off, was distinctly seen, and a look along the valley to the south of this mountain revealed the finely-shaped peak of Ben Rinnes, dim in the distance. Northwards the Atlantic sparkled in the sun, and to the north-east the rocky Dunnet Head was plainly visible. Even the Orkney Islands were boldly outlined. The scene was an ideal one, and it was not without a feeling of reluctance that the descent, the first thousand feet of which was very steep, was begun. Half-way down, a small loch, occupying the base of a huge corrie, was reached, out of which tumbled a brawling burn. The burn leapt in glistening foam, hundreds of feet down the steep slopes. This part of the Ben, facing the north-west, is birch clad, and walking was unpleasant owing to the dampness of the ground. Soon the shepherd's hut was reached, and a few minutes sufficed to bring me once more to Tongue Hotel. I had left at ten o'clock, and it was now only half-past two. That evening, on a journey of twenty-five miles eastwards along the Atlantic coast, Ben Laoghal presented ever new and, if possible, lovelier outlines. The day was a red-letter one among the many spent on the hills of Scotland.