

THE
Cairngorm Club Journal.

Vol. III.

JANUARY, 1900.

No. 14.

LOCHABER IN FEBRUARY.

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IN February last I was induced to join E. M. Corner for a few days' climbing in Lochaber. I had no previous experience of winter climbing, and an ice axe was to me a wonderful and mysterious weapon. I brought mine to King's Cross Station carefully shrouded in brown paper, and took the earliest opportunity of concealing it in the luggage rack. Corner, with the moral courage of a man who has climbed on snow before, brought his openly and unblushingly; thus, in spite of my modesty, the curious might know to what special variety of lunatics we belonged.

We arrived at Spean Bridge about noon on the 17th, and forthwith made several daring ascents—on paper. The morning of the 18th, however, found us in grim earnest. We had decided that Stob Ban (3217) must be our first victim, and at 8.15 we started with rope, rucksack, and axes to attack him. The weather was promising—but what it promised is another matter. We did our best, at least until we were clear of the houses, to look as if we generally started in a cold drizzle, and rather preferred it than otherwise. By the time that our wanderings across the moor had brought us to the Larig road the drizzle had changed to sleet, which in its turn gave way to snow. We kept to the

road beyond the top of the pass, and until we reached a foot-bridge (marked 1544 feet on the map) over a burn a short distance past an unoccupied hut. Here a halt was called for our second breakfast. It was a somewhat chilly banquet, and we were not tempted to linger unduly. The next section of the journey was through soft snow of uncertain depth. Our occasionally erratic gait was due to these uncertainties, and not to errors of diet at the recent meal. As we plunged on, the wind increased, the slope grew steeper, and the snow under foot firmer. The snow that was not under foot got into our eyes, and plastered our clothes and our faces. Of this I took but slight heed, for Corner was kicking steps, and my one aim in life was to fit my boots into them. The axes were, of course, absolutely necessary to steady us, but in one place only was the snow so hard as to necessitate the cutting of a few steps. The cairn was very welcome when it appeared a few yards ahead out of the general whiteness, but we repressed the desire to linger in its neighbourhood; for, although the weather was improving, the wind was furious and bitterly cold. A suggestion that we should return by way of Claurigh was not received with enthusiasm by the novice of the party, and was, therefore, withdrawn. Thus far we had not used the rope; and had we both been keen to glissade we should not have used it now. I, however, flatly declined to be initiated into the art by launching untethered into space. We accordingly went in couples until the slope eased off. The plunge across the soft snow was taken much more quickly than before, and we soon regained the footbridge. In the meantime the snow had ceased, and the clouds had begun to break up. From this point we strolled back at leisure, taking one more rest on a big boulder, from which we watched the changing sunset tints. We found that the road led us almost directly to the spot where the railway crosses the Spean, and from there to Spean Bridge. The 1-inch Ordnance, and Bartholomew's map may have been correct in pre-historic times, but they certainly do not show the road as it exists now.

A bigger day's work was projected for the 19th. This

was no less than to tramp across the moor into the big corrie between Aonach Beag and Sgor a' Choinnich Beag, to climb the latter mountain (3175), and to return over Sgor a' Choinnich Mor (3603), Stob Coire an Easain (3545), and Beinn na Socaich (3000 contour). The weather was magnificent: overhead a brilliant sky; under foot a frozen moor, which was all good to walk on; and hardly a breath of wind even on the tops. The start was made at 8.20. We got on the snow slopes about mid-day, and remained on snow until dusk. The views were clear and splendid all day. As for the sunset colours over sky and snow—there can never have been quite such a gorgeous display before, nor can there ever be again. We deeply pitied the millions of people who had missed the one great chance of their lives. But the colours faded long before we were off the slopes of Beinn na Socaich. We were on the right bank of the Cour, and we had to get on the left bank. More than once both of us clearly saw a bridge not far ahead, and each time that bridge resolved itself into detached rocks on our approach. At last, to our relief, a bridge suddenly sprang into existence close to us; on the other side was a track, and although this was sometimes difficult to keep in the faint light, we never lost it for long. At about 7 p.m. we crossed a stream on stepping stones, near Lianachan. Here a final halt was called, during which the coil of rope, which had been thrown on the ground, froze stiff. Nothing more remains to be recorded than the dogged perseverance with which we tramped on until 8.20, when we reached the hotel and our dinner.

The 20th was by common consent devoted to loafing and watching the hills from a distance. It was as bright and clear as on the previous day, but the light breeze had given way to a gale, which was whirling the snow aloft from the ridges and cornices in enormous spirals. Meanwhile plans were laid for the next three days. Our original intention had been to make the farm-house at Moy our headquarters, and Creag Meaghaidh our main object of attack. But they were unable to take us in at Moy; hence our migration to Spean Bridge. Still Creag Meaghaidh

and other heights near it must be climbed; and the only available plan of campaign involved leaving Spean Bridge by train at 7.45 a.m., and returning at 8.15 p.m. Lest I should seem to insist overmuch on our virtues, let it be recorded once for all that we caught that early train on each of the three mornings.

On the 21st we went by rail to Tulloch, walked about a mile beyond Roughburn, and then struck up towards Coire na h-Uamha. A fine-looking ridge runs up from the Coire to the middle top (3394) of Beinn a' Chaorruinn. There was a choice of routes to the summit: we could shape a course which was practically all snow, or we could take the rocky edge of the ridge. And here I seized the opportunity of buying some experience. I unhesitatingly voted for the rocks, as things one could trust to, while snow might play no end of tricks. So we started. First there was a small snow slope—150 or 200 feet. And, having chosen the route, I gallantly led the party. We roped (for the safety of the second man, of course); and after kicking steps for a part of the way, I proceeded to cut them for the remainder. Corner made remarks about these latter. I will not go so far as to say those remarks were unfit for publication; but, as I have reason to believe that they were intended for private circulation only, they shall not be repeated here. There may be methods of cutting steps without tiring one's wrists; I must have been using some other methods. At any rate, we had hardly reached my goal—the rocks—(after which all would be easy)—when I was willing to let Corner take a turn, just to warm himself. We reached the rocks; and then a few new factors entered into the problem. The snow became shallow, and underneath it was frozen turf, which is as hard and as slippery as anything in nature. In addition to this, the rocks were coated with ice, excepting where the east wind appeared to have removed the glaze. I think Corner was happy then. He worked the way to the top without a rest, except when he anchored himself in order to give me the "moral support" of the rope in following him. It was, however, a thoroughly enjoyable scramble: difficult enough for the inexperienced, and possibly

dangerous to the careless ; but we were not careless, and one at least of us was capable of leading the way. On reaching an exposed shoulder of the ridge, we suddenly encountered about a gale and a half of wind, but the mountain soon sheltered us again. On the top the wind was tremendous ; and when we reached the north summit (3422) we found ourselves in the midst of a witches' frolic, such as we had seen from a distance on the previous day. The descent was started from the south top (3437), and we reached the road at Roughburn. We knew that tea awaited us at the station-master's house at Tulloch ; and, better still, we knew we had time to drink it, and to stretch our legs afterwards.

On the 22nd we hired a trap at Tulloch, and drove a little beyond the lower end of Loch Laggan, arranging that the trap should meet us at Moy in the afternoon. Our way was up the Coire Coille na Froise. It was a toilsome trudge, and we took very little rest until we reached the lochan at the head of the Coire, which lochan was frozen over. We were at first puzzled as to the position of the outlet. At last it dawned on us that we had been walking on the snow which covered the burn. This point settled, we encamped for lunch, breaking a hole in the ice for our water supply. On the opposite side of the lochan is a large gully, which was, of course, full of snow. Corner set the example of walking straight across the lochan to the foot of the gully. The lower part of the gully (for about 200 feet) was easily walked up by kicking into the snow, but after that the slope became steeper and the surface harder. We, therefore, roped, and Corner led the way, his step-cutting this time being subject to expert criticisms based on my own practical knowledge. A short rush through soft snow at the top brought us within an easy walk of Meall Coire Coille na Froise (3299). From this point we had a wonderfully clear view of the Cairngorms. The range from Braeriach to Cairn Toul stood out well, while behind them Ben Muich Dhui marked the sky line. We visited seven out of the eight tops on Creag Meaghaidh, including, of course, the principal summit (3700), and finishing with An Cearcallach (3250). Corner added Crom Leathad (3441) to his score. The descent was made to Moy.

Our exploits on the 23rd can scarcely be termed heroic. The train took us to Corroul (1354), from which we walked up and down the easy slopes of Carn Dearg (3084), Sgor Gaibhre (3128), and Sgor Choinnich (3040). One would hardly guess that these round-topped humps, nearly surrounded as they are by greater heights, form part of the main watershed of Scotland; but a glance at the map will show that the water which flows down one side finds its way by Lochs Eriicht and Rannoch to the Tay, while the water which flows down the other side joins the Spean by way of Lochs Ossian and Gulbin. There is one other thing to be said for the Corroul Hills. They afford a very fine view in profile of the several ranges between the south end of Loch Treig and Ben Nevis, the greater but more distant mountains towering in succession over those which are smaller but nearer. This, our last day, was really a lazy one. Indeed, it was necessary to prolong our rests, in order to fill out the time. I am afraid it must also be confessed that we were not altogether disinclined for those rests. Still, we may fairly claim that the aggregate of work done within six consecutive days was creditable. The interest and enjoyment were more than worth the journeys to and from London, and we went back, as we have always done, with a deepened love for the Scottish mountains.