

BEN A'N.

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THROUGH the introduction of Sir Walter Scott, everybody is acquainted with Ben A'n. One can hardly think of the hill, or utter its name, without being caught repeating the distich—

“While on the north, through middle air,
Ben An heaved high his forehead bare”.

It is variously spelt, Ben A'n, Benan, Ben An, Ben A'an, Ben Awn, Binean, Binnan, &c., but the name is really the same as our northern Ben Avon, and not “Binean” (a peak), which is the diminutive of “Ben” (a mountain), the syllable *an* being the masculine termination of diminutives, and *ag* of feminines. [“A Sketch of the most Remarkable Scenery near Callander of Monteath. By Margaret Oswald. 3rd Ed., Stirling. 1806”.]

I have long had a nodding acquaintance with this much seen, much sung, and much painted height. Every summer since 1879 I have visited the lake, from which it has probably derived its name; but I had never reached the top of the hill, being content to potter about its base, hunting for rare plants in the stream channels. Towards the end of last autumn I followed an impulse to pay Ben A'n a visit, which was all the more easily carried out owing to the circumstance that I could “sit and gang for'ad”, as far as Duncraggan. Duncraggan was famous, in a former generation, on account of its portly Kate (Mrs. Ferguson), a lady visited by the late Queen when spending a few days in the neighbourhood of the Trossachs in the autumn of 1869. My friend and I drove past “Samson's Putting Stone” without speaking of the ice-giant that perched it on the rock there. Coillie Bhroine was also passed without reference to the atrocious supernatural Highland Shelly which carried the children into a watery grave in Loch Vennachar—a circumstance accounting for

the name, "the wood of mourning". When we came to the well-known ford, we did not quote—

"This is Coilantogle ford,
And thou must keep thee with thy sword".

Our first reference to Ben A'n, or Sir Walter Scott, during the journey was at the entrance to Glen Finglas. A road to the right branches off and leads up the glen. Glen Finglas was once a royal hunting-ground. It must ever be famous as the birthplace of Sir Walter's poetic fancy—"meet nurse for a poetic child"—having inspired his first original ballad, "Glen Finlas, or Lord Ronald's Coronach", which appeared in 1801. It is noteworthy that Perthshire furnished most of the materials wrought into his first novel. The young man had been drinking in, through all his senses, the romance and romantic scenery of a district subsequently rendered famous by "Rob Roy", "Legend of Montrose", and, above all, "The Lady of the Lake". To the honour of Scott it must be said that visitors to the Trossachs think of incidents connected with his fictions even more than of the scenes of natural grandeur characterising the locality. Only one thing gives renown to the Bridge of Turk, and it is duly expressed when Scott's lines are quoted—

"And when the Brigg of Turk was won,
The headmost horseman rode alone".

The man in scarlet coat and shining buttons and white beaver hat, under whose guidance visitors are usually introduced to this paradise of tourists, never fails to point out the bleached bones of Fitz James's dappled grey. Glen Finglas was the birthplace of the Rev. James Stewart, Killin, his mother having been accidentally there at the time. Mr. Stewart was the first translator of the New Testament into Gaelic; his version appeared in 1765, and is said by judges to be both accurate and clear.

George Eyre-Todd, in "The Sketch Book of the North", tells a waesome and weird story of this glen. A party of an hundred men were conveying a corpse from Glen Finglas for interment in St. Bride's kirkyard, near Loch Lubnag.

The weight of the company broke the ice of an insignificant tarn on the side of Ben Ledi, over which they were passing, "and that single moment sufficed to leave sixty women husbandless in Glen Finglas below. No tablet . . . records the half-forgotten disaster". The "Scottish Tourist" (1832) has the same story: "the lake was frozen and covered with snow, and in crossing it the ice gave way, when the whole company, amounting to nearly 200 perished". Shame upon the more recent writer for curtailing the number! The author of a "Guide", 1890, assures us that the whole funeral party were drowned, and that "the inhabitants ever after gave up taking their dead to St. Bride, and formed a new burying-ground in their sequestered native glen". This story appears to have been got up to account for the name of the tarn, Lochan an Corp, though it requires the occasional carcase of a sheep merely to explain why the lochan should be called "the loch of the dead bodies".

Ben A'n owes its existence to the hardness and durability of the rock composing it. The schistose grit has resisted the mighty agonies and energies of erosion and denudation which have carved out hill and loch and glen in this picturesque district. The "forehead bare" is 1750 feet above sea-level, Meall Gainmheich to the north is higher by 101 feet, and Sron Armalte, behind the Trossachs Hotel, comes within 600 feet of its height. A writer in "The Merchant's Guide to Stirling and District" makes a singular mistake. "The land", he says, "rises in terraces, behind the Hotel, and terminates in the mighty Ben A'n, 1149 feet high". He should have said the "mighty Sron". Shearer's "Guide" warns us that the ascent of Ben A'n "is somewhat difficult and requires great caution, and to accomplish it with safety the day should be clear". The state of the weather is so important a factor in our life all through, that we have converted the old fashioned, and courteous and kindly wish, "Good morning!" "Good day!" or "Good evening!" into a plain matter of fact, or expression of opinion—"It's a good morning", "a rainy day", or "a dark night", &c.,

and such facts, or opinions, are duly reported to every passing stranger. Of supreme importance to the heath-hopper are the meteorologic conditions. A passing cloud will put his moral character to the test as truly as a pair of ill-fitting boots.

My day on Ben A'n was all that could be wished. The strong gale blowing when the top was reached was disagreeable, but harmless. One's sixteen-stone weight stands one in good stead in a pretty strong wind.

The first discoverer of the Trossachs was the Rev. James Robertson, minister of Callander (not Sir Walter Scott). He wrote the "Statistical Account" of the parish in 1791, in which he expatiates on the beauty of the scenery. "A Sketch of a Tour to Callander and the Trossachs", included in C. Randall's "History of Stirling" (1812), is attributed to him, from which we note, "the naked Binean rears his bare and battered head to the clouds, and echoes to the blast which wheels around his base". The Rev. P. Graham, D.D., in the "Sketches of Perthshire" (2nd Ed., 1812), writes:—"Its conical summit and great height seem to render it peculiarly liable to the attraction of lightening [*sic*]. James Stewart states that, after a violent thunderstorm which occurred in August about five years ago, he observed the rock on the summit of Binnan torn up by the lightening [*sic*] in furrows of a zig-zag direction, to the depth of several inches". In autumn, 1811, during a very heavy rain, an avalanche, torn from its southern side, and near its summit, "carried down an immense mass of stones and earth, with a noise like thunder; the path of its current may be easily traced from the road". This storm was reproduced, with variations, by the author of "The Scottish Tourist" (we quote from the 1831 edition)—"In the autumn of 1811, during an awful storm, an immense portion of it (Ben A'n) was thrown from its southern side, near the summit, to the base, with dreadful noise which filled the air with barbarous dissonance sufficient to have aroused echo in her most secluded cell". Such accounts of ruptures on Ben A'n have been caught and clothed in flamboyant style by the Rev. Charles Rogers, in his "Week

at Bridge of Allan":—"Benan terminates in a bare cone, and in its every feature exhibits the beau ideal of mountain sterility. Huge blocks lie scattered around, which have been precipitated from its crest, with a sound which, re-echoed from rock to rock, has made the air to tremble". The Rev. James Robertson, quoted by the compiler, or author, of "The Traveller's Guide through Scotland" (supposed to be a Rev. Joseph Robertson), and by James Mitchell in the dumpy "Scotsman's Library", was surely drawing the long bow when he recorded the following:—"On one side the water eagle sits in majesty, in sight of his nest on the face of Benvenu; . . . on the other, the wild goats climb, where they have scarce ground for the soles of their feet, and the wild fowls, perched on the trees, or on the pinnacle of a rock, look down, with composed defiance at man". The American eagle, to be sure, during the summer months, is not a *rara avis* here, but any other indications of the noble bird's presence would be hard to find. Tame goats, especially Nannies, are kept for their milk, and may be seen, but wild goats disporting themselves on Ben A'n would be a sight worth seeing—and the defiant birds are not in abundant evidence. This imaginary picture by the minister of Callander, the lady who wrote "The Sketch of the Remarkable Scenery", referred to above, has, no doubt following ketterin instincts, *lifted* body bulk, along with other booty. If she were alive she might well plead the excuse—"I am not alone in the practice of such predatory habits".

Viewed from the Menteith Hills, across Loch Venachar, Ben A'n is imposing and impressive. The forehead, bald, weather-beaten, and full of wrinkles and scowls, contrasts with the calm shining lake at its foot. The cone is so pronounced from this point of view that, were it not for the higher mountains seen in the background, we should regard Ben A'n as a veritable giant, grim, savage, and domineering over neighbours endowed with less force of character and less power. Although nearly twice its height, Ben Ledi displays an appearance tame and uninteresting in comparison with the humbler but more startling and fascinating hill.

From the summit one of the most beautiful sights is Ellen's Isle, resting on the silver lake, so called from the name of Scott's Lady of the Lake. We can think of it in comfort in this connection, rather than as being the scene where, during Cromwell's Scottish campaigns, another Ellen, a horrid Highland virago, is said to have killed a soldier swimming to land on the island. "Her great-grandson lives (1806) at Bridge of Turk, who, besides others, attests the anecdote". We are inclined to doubt the *bona fides* of this story. This great-grandson of Ellen Stewart's, attesting an event a century and a half after it took place, was presumably drawing on his imagination, while the "others" would follow suit. Ellen, who "carried a dagger below her apron and with one stroke severed his head from his body", was, we could well believe, a sorely maligned and misrepresented woman, and that, too, by her descendent and his neighbours. More likely was Ellen Stewart a mild-mannered and pitiful dame that, like her modern great-great-grandnieces and great-great-grand-children, would have gone out of her way to save the poor fellow's life rather than sned off his head with a *dagger*. Perhaps she merely caused him to *lose his head* by drawing her dagger sword-wise across his neck.

The view from the summit of Ben A'n is not extensive, owing to the proximity of loftier heights. Meall Cala, Ben Ledi, Ben Dearg, Ben Venue, the heights near Aberfoyle, and Ben Lomond prevent a long prospect. The so-called "Cobbler" and Ben Vorlich, beyond Loch Lomond, are, however, unmistakable. The most striking scene is that of the various lochs flashing pleasantly on the eye on a clear day. Almost the whole extent of Loch Katrine is in sight, with Loch Arklet in the West and Loch Conn in the south-west. Lochs Achray and Vennachar are in the south. The Pass of the Trossachs may be observed below, and to the south-west Bealach-nam-bo, the Pass of Achray, and the sluices. No villages were observed, except one, which from the direction we deemed to be Balfroun. Neither the Trossachs Hotel (formerly Ardeheanochrochan) nor Glenbruich can be seen from the summit.