

## BEN CRUACHAN.

BY A. L. BAGLEY.

AFTER a torrential week lost at Luss, I took the early steamer up the lake to Ardlui, thence the coach to Crianlarich, and from there the train to Taynuilt. There was the usual storm while we steamed up the lake, but it was mercifully fine as we drove from Ardlui to Crianlarich; all the afternoon it poured in the usual style. I had come to Taynuilt in order to ascend Ben Cruachan, just as I had gone to Luss to ascend Ben Lomond, and it really seemed as though I were doomed to disappointment here also, for during the next two days there was the same continuous succession of violent storms. There was an aneroid barometer in my lodgings, from which, however, I was unable to extract any crumb of comfort; indeed, the indicator sank so low that I was seriously afraid that it would go right round, and come up on the other side: and what awful convulsion of nature might then be expected to follow? However, I am thankful to say that I was spared *that* dreadful portent, for the third morning (Monday, September 21st) was, to my great amazement, fine when I arose, and seemed likely to remain so, notwithstanding the strenuous efforts of the barometer to adhere to "very stormy". Of course I took advantage of this remarkable state of things to set out for Ben Cruachan, and was rewarded by a fine day, perfect except for a haze that crept up soon after mid-day. I may remark *en passant* that this was the only day in my fortnight's holiday on which there was no rain.

I suppose most people are aware that Ben Cruachan is a twin—that is to say, there are two principal peaks of almost identical height and only about half-a-mile apart. There are, however, several subsidiary peaks lying between Dalmally and the twin main peaks, and, indeed, Ben Cruachan is really rather a small mountain range than a



single mountain, as there are about half-a-dozen peaks which exceed 3000 feet, and several others which closely approach that magic height. My idea was to ascend from the Dalmally side and traverse the whole range from end to end, omitting the outlying peaks of Ben Vourie and Meall Cuanail; and I will now proceed to relate how I successfully accomplished that meritorious design.

I left Taynuilt by the 8.42 train for Loch Awe station, and walked thence along the Dalmally road to the point where the path to Ben Cruachan strikes off. I say "path", because both guide-book and natives speak of one; but as a matter of fact such paths as exist—and there is any amount of them at first—all lose themselves in the bogs, in which the unwary pedestrian runs considerable risk of losing himself also. Probably, however, the bogs were very much worse than usual, owing to the persistent heavy rains of the past few weeks; at any rate nobody who has ascended Ben Cruachan by this route, and with whom I have compared notes, seems to have suffered from the bogs as I did, and many men appear hardly to have noticed them. I have, however, a painfully clear recollection of the manner in which I bounded gracefully from one comparatively solid tuft of heather to another, varied by occasional ungraceful flounderings when an apparently solid tuft turned out a delusion and a snare, and did its level best to drag me down with a hideous squelch into the sloshy depths. This sort of thing is a fatiguing exercise, and offers, moreover, no compensations; so I was very glad to reach the foot-bridge over the burn, just beyond the point where the two burns meet, and to find somewhat more solid ground on the other side, from which the actual ascent now begins.

From here two ridges, either of which may be taken, ascend very steeply to two peaks, each just about 3000 feet high; from these two peaks the ridges drop a few hundred feet, and then ascend more steeply still to a central peak, 3272 feet, which has no name bestowed upon it on the maps, although it must surely possess one.\* The two ridges,

\* Stob Dhamh.



converging on this central peak, thus form a gigantic semi-circle, enclosing a wild and desolate corrie, the rock walls of which are for the most part grandly precipitous. I do not know that there is any choice between the two ridges. I chose the right-hand one, and, when I was half-way up, I thought the other looked much finer, and wished I had followed it; but I have not the slightest doubt but that, if I had chosen the left-hand one, I should have been similarly dissatisfied. At all events I reached the central peak of this semicircle, dominating grandly the magnificent corrie, at 12.30, having left the Loch Awe station at 9.10, and from this central point there seemed nothing to choose between the two ridges.

But when you have attained the summit of this peak, although it is considerably over 3000 feet in height, and although it has taken you rather over three hours of fairly hard work to accomplish, you must by no means imagine that you have ascended Ben Cruachan. On the contrary, you have hardly begun to ascend him, for this is merely one of the half-dozen outlying subsidiary peaks, and the real twin summits have not yet been visible. Now, however, as you step on the summit of this 3272 feet peak, the easternmost of the twin summits bursts upon you in all its beauty and terror. Far away, a couple of miles or so across an awful boulder-strewn wilderness, with the most frightful precipices falling sheer into Glen Noe on the north, rises a needle of rock, a miniature snowless Matterhorn; this is the real summit of Ben Cruachan, the western twin-peak, hidden behind it, being about 80 feet lower. The emotions with which you regard it will, of course, depend upon your appetite for climbing; if you are a scansorial artist (it sounds rather like a tailor, but I merely mean a climber) of the first water, you will gloat over the sight and burn for the fray; if you are a humble pedestrian and hill-walker your heart will sink into your boots, and you will wonder why you came. I am free to confess that I belonged at this time to the latter category, and indeed, even now, can hardly claim to have graduated in the higher division; I had then never ascended any mountain except



Snowdon, up which mountain I had been personally conducted, so to speak. As I sat there and gazed upon that rock-needle, my heart distinctly failed me. I wondered how I should get up, and whether, if I succeeded in getting up, I should ever come down again. However, it looks, of course, at a distance of two miles, very much steeper than it really is, and I found no great difficulty in the ascent.

From the 3272 feet peak one descends several hundred feet, then ascends another of 3312 feet (Drochaid Glas), making the third peak of 3000 feet or thereabouts, then comes another descent, and finally a mile or more along the ridge, with a clean-cut edge falling away to Glen Noe in the frightful precipices already alluded to. From these first three peaks, I had revelled in the most magnificent prospect that I have ever beheld: a sea of mountain tops all around, more mountains, I suppose, in the one view than I had ever seen in my life before. Behind and far below lay Dalmally, half-hidden by trees in the sylvan Strath of Orchy; behind that was Ben Lui, with hundreds of encircling mountains, which I could not identify, though I believed that I recognised Ben Lomond amongst, or rather beyond, them; Loch Awe looked more like a river than a lake, with its 20 miles of graceful curve. In front the greater part of Loch Etive was hidden by the twin peaks of Ben Cruachan, but a little corner was visible, with a tiny dot, which I suppose was the little lake steamer making its way across; beyond the low island of Lismore was the Sound of Mull, with the mountains of Morven and Ard-gour to the right, and those of the island of Mull to the left; a group of fine mountains headed Loch Etive; beyond, the huge, unshapely head of Ben Nevis, and, farther still, other mountains without end faded away into the dim and distant north. Never before had I seen such a glorious view, and but very seldom since.

Unfortunately, as I picked my way along the ridge, I became aware that a thick haze was gradually creeping over the scene. I was very much afraid, too, that rain was approaching; but none came, nor was I ever actually in



the clouds, for which, with those awful precipices on my right hand, I was very thankful. But a curious filmy haze slowly blotted out the whole view, and when I stepped on the summit of the eastern and loftiest peak at 2 o'clock, there was absolutely nothing whatever to be seen, which was a great disappointment. As it was very cold up there, and there was no view, I did not linger, but hurried on as fast as I could along the ridge which connects the twin summits, and up the western and last peak, which I reached at 2.45. By this time the sun was out, and the wind had died down, and I sat for about ten minutes on the summit, finishing the remains of my lunch, and hoping that the haze would disperse, which, however, it did not. While I was sitting there, a man appeared on the other summit, which was clear of the haze; and we stood there, one on each twin summit, the only visible evidences of life. I waved my stick at him, and drank his health in my last remaining drop of whisky.

When I left the summit at about 3 o'clock, I thought I had plenty of time, but I found the descent took longer than I had expected. When I got to the end of the wilderness of boulders, which lay for miles around the summits, I found that the whole mountain side was one gigantic bog, and for the next hour I had a terrible time of floundering and struggling, similar to that which I had gone through earlier in the day. However, I descended to the road near the Bridge of Awe at last, and reached my comfortable little room at Taynuilt at 6 o'clock, feeling very well pleased with myself.