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TWO EXCURSIONS TO WESTER ROSS.

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WESTER ROSS should be one of the finest mountaineering districts in Britain, witness Munro's list, were it not cursed with a climate utterly beyond competition in the way of fogs, rain, and general perversity. There is a legend among very old inhabitants that once upon a time six weeks of continuous fine weather were enjoyed in Kintail. One likes to reverence old tradition, but at a' events it is very hard to get any person under middle age to hazard a definite statement on the vexed question. Three seasons ago, a climbing friend of mine went to Glen Shiel with an imposing list of peaks in his pocket-book, the majority of which he purposed bagging. For a week he sent me day by day the most depressing letters imaginable on the subject of Scottish weather; he also delivered himself of divers half-hearted rhapsodies on the glories of waterfalls in spate; but when word came that he had decamped to a more blissful clime, he could not report a single authentic peak captured. Undeterred, nevertheless, by his gloomy experience, I set off next summer to the same spot, being fortunate enough to secure as my comrade a member of the Cairngorm Club, who is warranted sound and weather-tight, and an excellent companion under all sorts of climatic conditions.

A wet holiday always begins fine—this is one of the safest forecasts I am acquainted with. The walk across

Mam Ratagain was delightful; the celebrated view of Loch Duich was all that the guide books declare, and more, too; and when Mac met me at Shiel Inn, we flattered ourselves that the Kintail weather office was going to make special arrangements for our benefit. Even till an advanced hour next day the deceptive appearances continued, and we managed to bag three genuine Kintail peaks—Sgurr Leac nan Each (3013 feet), Sgurr na Creige (3082 feet), and the Peak of the Saddle (3317 feet)—all in one morning, ere the normal state of things prevailed again. Then our day's programme was rudely curtailed. Sgurr Fhuaran (Scour Ouran) had to be given up for the present, and we returned to Shiel Inn in the humid condition that is expected of guests at that weather-beaten hostelry. We durst not put our noses outside the door next day; but, still sanguine, prepared ourselves by careful attention to each item on the culinary programme for whatsoever adventure the morning might bring forth. We were going into a hungry land, and, whether we attempted more peaks, or took the nearest way to the Highland Railway, there was no knowing when we should get another square meal.

The morning began as wet as ever, notwithstanding which we started out, quitted the road near Dorusduain, and ascended the savage glen that leads to the bealach above the celebrated Glomach Falls. Our further movements depended entirely on the chances of the weather; beyond this our plans were a blank. It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good. Even a rainy southwester had one thing to its credit; it swelled the falls immensely beyond their ordinary grandeur, and far beyond the chary praise accorded them by the guide books. Ross is above all others the county of waterfalls, and the Falls of Glomach are the finest in Ross. We turned down into Glen Elchaig well satisfied with our day's excursion, even if this were to be the end of it. But it was not the end. Glen Elchaig began with bogs, spates, and drenching rain; it finished with rainbows and sunshine. At Killilan, where the river Ling quietly ceases to be a stream, and

subsides into the placid reaches of Loch Long, we took out the map again, and planned schemes of further exploration. Beyond the remote sources of the Ling, whose broad, deep waters swept past us black as ink, there was a picturesque arrangement of 3000 feet contour lines, that attracted us in spite of their distance and the inhospitable look of the intervening glens. With little hesitation we turned upstream, and in a mile left behind us all trace of human existence, save a few old larachs and desultory evidences of a track that may have been coeval with them. Evening had begun, and there were nine miles of uncertain length between us and a solitary house that might or might not be inhabited, the only possible resting-place from Killilan to Glen Carron. The mountains were folding themselves up in the mists; the desolate glen of the Ling grew darker and longer, and the incessant roar of the pent-up river louder and more melancholy as we went further into the wilderness. Our ships were burnt, and, if the stalker's cottage proved a delusion, a night on the heather was the sure alternative. Often the track died away completely; there were formidable burns to cross, stony and moraine-heaped hill-sides to skirt, and just as darkness came down we had to struggle through a narrow pass, full of rank heather and bracken taller than our heads, where we floundered about almost helpless.

Among the frequent communications I have read on the subject of aids to endurance, I have seen little or no reference to the extraordinary value of the common "bull's eye". We had laid in a small but adequate supply of this admirable confection at Loch Duich, and for many a long and dreary mile we kept up our strength and spirits by its means; for the "bull's eye" not only has valuable nutritive properties, but the act of sucking it supplies the mind with an object of interest when the road is tedious and scenery lacking. It was dark when we reached the critical spot where we conjectured the house was to be found, but our search was not crowned with success immediately. At last we saw its humble roof nestling under the base of a rough and heathery hill;

howbeit there was no gleam of light in the window, and no smoke issuing from the chimney. We knocked, and waited impatiently. The house proved to be tenanted, and when at last the door was opened, we received a cordial welcome.

Next day we continued our journey up the fast dwindling river Ling to the col where it rises, under the slopes of Sgurr Choinnich and Sgurr a' Chaoruinn, the peaks we were bound for. The weather was intermittently good and bad, which is as evil a state as any for mountaineering, because it prevents one from giving up the job altogether and making at once for a more comfortable level. By the time we had mounted to the stony tableland that forms the base of our peak, the rain drove us to seek some manner of shelter, and all we could get was a fragment of a ruined wall that seemed to be part of the forest march between Monar and Achnashellach. Ragged cloud masses with dark streamers of rain went stalking through the glens, and at last it was borne in upon us that if we meant not to lose our peaks after all, we must climb in defiance of weather; and before long we reached the top.

In the immensity of earth and sky through which the eye ranged from our lofty and isolated ridge different kinds of weather were chasing each other with wild rapidity. Moruisg, directly facing us, was now wholly enveloped in floating veils of mist, and now the veils were torn to shreds and flung adrift on the winds. The mists surged up again and again to the topmost summits with magical swiftness, and were dissipated just as quickly. They swarmed over Lurg Mhòr, giving its void and shapeless mass an indefinable grandeur. We turned again and again to admire the slender pyramid springing from its western shoulders, Bidein a Choire Sheasgaich. But all the wreckage of the drifting clouds seemed ultimately to be borne over peak and glen and piled up against the mighty barrier of An Riabhachan, beyond the head of Loch Monar, whose far-extended bulk, vaster and more chaotic than Lurg Mhòr, obstructed our view of Mam

Sodhail and Carn Eige, the crowning heights of all these wild ranges. Through the dishevelled clouds that enwrapped An Riabhachan a big snow-wreath and a long white gully, gleaming where we thought the sky would have been, gave us an idea of its towering height.

No cairn marks the highest point of Sgurr Choinnich. The top is a longish ridge, and the omission at first caused us some doubts as to which end was actually 3260 feet high. Between it and Sgurr a' Chaoruinn, the summit of the whole range, there is a gap 500 feet deep, the descent of which on our side was rocky, skirting the great precipice at the head of the corrie. A cold white mist came rolling through this gap. A climb of some 800 feet took us to the summit of Sgurr a' Chaoruinn, and we were gratified to behold a cairn of such size and build as made amends for Sgurr Choinnich's lack in the one thing that gives a proper finish to a mountain. But the central peak has none of the grand outlines of its brother peaks, being humpy and flat-topped, though it commands a view of several mountains we had not yet seen—little-known summits that overtopped ours to the east. But the peak we stood on merits a certain dignity as marking the watershed of Scotland; a few yards to our left the streams were beginning to run towards Skye and the Atlantic, while to the right they ran down to the great glens whose rivers seek the North Sea.

Our fondly-nursed design of going on to the eastward peak of Bidein, and so capturing three peaks, before making off towards the Highland Railway, was not smiled on by the destinies; we had to be content with a brace. For the best part of a week we had been free from the odious tyranny of the time-table; but now, even here, 3452 feet above sea-level, we were to feel its bondage again. My comrade pulled one of these hated documents out of his pocket and coolly announced that he must catch the Aberdeen train at 6'30. Figuratively, and only figuratively, we came down from the clouds at once. Not merely was Bidein out of our reach, but there was hard work before us to arrive at a railway station in time, so

little were we acquainted with the neighbourhood. Rain had sodden everything; burns were in spate, bogs in spate, and whilst we cautiously avoided the sudden performance of a glissade on the slippery moss, we turned an anxious eye towards the distant river, which appeared to cut us off from the only practicable side of the glen. When, however, we reached the dreaded bank we got across with only a slight wetting.

An hour later we were looking back towards the peaks we had come down from, and we saw them on their highest and grandest side towering magnificently at the head of the glen. Soon they were out of sight, and then we bade good-bye to the desolation and savagery that had been our companions for two long days. Westwards we looked across the woods and streams and lochs of Glen Carron to the hills of Coulin Forest, a stately group of rocky domes and ridges encircling a deep black corrie, with the Torridon peaks lifting still loftier heads above their highest crest. And so we ended our days of peak-bagging as all mountaineering holidays should end—with the sight of fresh peaks challenging us to climb them. My friend caught his train at the expense of his tea, for Craig Inn had for twenty years been nothing but a name on the map, and I sought the house of an amenable forester, where I got a much-needed meal, and had my clothes dried, before catching the last train to Loch Alsh on my way to mountains in the south.

Last July we made another attempt to climb the Kintail peaks, endeavouring to outflank the weather by approaching the district from the other side. We left the Highland Railway at Beauly, where we hoped to find a mail-coach waiting to take us a score miles on our road. But the mails were not due to start for another three hours; so, rather than cool our heels at Beauly, we set off on foot, westward ho! The coach did not overtake us at the twelfth milestone as we hoped: nor for many miles further. It gave us ample leisure to admire the Falls of Kilmorack, and the grandeur of the Druim, the deep-cut

pass through which the Beauly rushes tempestuously after ten miles of leisurely wayfaring in Strath Glass. The Beauly has many disguises and noms-de-guerre. It begins as a fine and stalwart burn, with the name of Gleann Fionn attaching to it, under Càrn Fuaralach, away among the west coast giants. A day or two later we were to fish and bathe in the deep pools of Gleann Fionn. Then it becomes the Affric, a king of Highland rivers, with Lochs Affric and Beinn a' Mheadhoin, majestic twain, expanding out of it. Rushing in a series of smoking linns through the barriers of Glen Affric, it suddenly assumes a most pacific character as the river Glass, ambling quietly along between tilth and meadow. Last of all it takes the name of Beauly, and sweeps in a final paroxysm of fury and foam down to Kilmorack, whence it marches on with the dignified step of age to its last rest. The river has from time immemorial marked a highway from east to west, and it was to be our lot to follow it on foot right to the other side of Scotland. We had walked seventeen miles, and reached the teetotalised hotel of Cannich, better known as Glen Affric Hotel, ere the belated coach overtook us, and then we preferred tea to a lift of two or three miles only. That night, after each doing our thirty miles and odd, with heavy rucksacks and climbing boots as handicap, a somewhat rash beginning to a week on the tops, we found sleeping quarters in Glen Affric, in a favourable position for attempting Mam Sodhail and Carn Eige next morning. But we had paid no heed to the forecast, that a bright, hot day is often the preliminary to a spell of wet weather. Though the morning began gaily enough, it soon put on a sullen look; the mountains muffled themselves closer and closer in mist, and rain sprinkled us as we walked along the bottom of the southern Sgurr na Lapaich, and turned up the adjoining corrie. A thousand feet below the summit we found ourselves in the mist; but the way was obvious. We climbed out of a marshy corrie when the stalker's track died away, and reached a narrow ridge connecting our peak with Sgurr na Lapaich. Once we caught a glimpse of the deep glen that runs in

from Glen Affric to the foot of the final peak, and a drearier view could not be imagined. On the map this Glen Fiadhach looks a convenient way of approach to the two crowning summits of the range, but let mountaineers beware of its trackless bogs and interminable rubbish-heaps. A tarn at the head of it was almost encircled by great drifts of snow; other drifts gleamed through the cold, wan mists.

After a rest in the shelter of Mam Sodhail's very commodious cairn (3862 feet), we made a false start for Carn Eige (3877 feet), and in the mist found ourselves four hundred feet down the same ridge we had ascended. Disgusted with this mishap and with the total extinction of the view, we gave up the rival peak, and turned west along the main ridge, after a visit to the dismantled house under the summit, which appears to have been occupied by deer-watchers in the reign of Mr. Winans. We bagged Ciste Dubh (3606 feet) but missed Carn Coulavie (3568 feet); and when the mist allowed us to discover our whereabouts, we found ourselves coming down a precipitous spur into the next corrie, that of Allt Coulavie, with the head of Loch Affric beneath us. All trouble, it seemed, would be over as soon as we reached the bottom of this rocky slope; but the corrie was embanked at the outlet by another steep slope, across which we were glad to avail ourselves of the deer-tracks marking the more practicable routes.

The two ends of Glen Affric are an extreme contrast. At the Dog Falls the framework of the glen is invisible, the hills being shrouded with trees right to their summits, and the river foaming along under birch boughs that interlace overhead; above Loch Affric, the Scottish fir has driven out the birch, and then fallen a victim to the harsh climate of the mountains. Nothing is left at last but

“The bones of desolation's nakedness”.

At Alltbeath, below the point where the roads for Loch Duich fork, we could get only the lightest refreshment, but at Camban, the most westerly house in the glen,

situated between the range culminating in Sgurr Fhuaran and the long mass of Beinn Fhada, we were lucky enough to secure comfortable quarters, and tarried there two nights.

Beinn Fhada (3383 feet) had long been a special object of desire to both of us, and we started up the slopes at the back of the house next morning without delay, in spite of a thick mist. Camban is the most favourable point for an ascent of the "Long Mountain" of Kintail, if, that is, you want a climb devoid of incident. Nothing interesting happened until we had spent nearly two hours loitering and snoozing at the cairn; then the curtain rolled up and the play began. It was as if we saw the world re-born out of thick darkness. First the mountain we stood upon was revealed to us, as something more than an uncertain extent of barren ground. Right at our feet the earth broke away in a profound corrie, and in front of us the broad ridge split up into pinnacled masses of sheer rock that towered over gulfs immeasurable of steaming mist. Across the mighty rift of Gleann Lichd, 3000 feet deep, and apparently a half-mile wide, so hard was it to judge of the distances, peak after peak clove the mist, Sgurr Fhuaran the highest and grandest; and beyond were the Glen Shiel peaks, and those of Knoydart, peeping over each other's shoulders, with glints of blue sea in unexpected places between. Kintail and the adjacent districts simply bristle with three-thousand footers, and few were missing from this wild panorama. A sea of stormy clouds was eddying and tossing along like a tidal current, just over them, but only the most distant mountains, the Coolins and those north of Mam Sodhail, had their heads enveloped.

We studied all the approaches to Sgurr Fhuaran from the vantage ground of Beinn Fhada, as we returned westward; but rain came on again in the evening, and in the morning it was a question whether we should try the ascent, or make the best of our way down Gleann Lichd and round the mountain to Shiel Inn. We determined to make the venture, and half-way up Coire Dhomhain

began to plume ourselves on a triumphant day, for the storms had passed over, and all the peaks of Beinn Mhòr, the "Five Sister of Kintail", were lit up with sunshine in a semicircle before us. But excess of gallantry was our undoing. We were not content with Sgurr Fhuaran, the handsomest of the Sisters, but were rash enough to challenge them all. Sgùrr nan Spainteach received us with a pronounced rebuff, one of the worst storms of wind, rain, and mist we had encountered. Our reception by the next member of the family circle was still more unpleasant, and we did not summon up courage to approach the third. Very glad we were, when we had descended a thousand feet, and the mist began to thin, to find that we were coming into Glen Shiel.

Mac left me at Shiel Inn, as I wanted to have another try at Sgurr Fhuaran next day, if the weather changed. As it did not change, I followed him up, and bade him farewell again at Strome Ferry, whence I adjourned to Plockton to dry my clothes, and rest. The sandstone and quartzite peaks of Coulin Forest, which we had admired from a distance last year, were my next object, but they too proved unattainable. A deluge of rain kept me indoors till mid-day, and when the train reached Achnashellach at noon, a series of violent storms had not quite spent its force. There were intervals of splendid sunshine, but from all the peaks around Coire Làir storm signals were fluttering all day, and I was heartily thankful later on that I took the moorland walk across to Torridon instead of the sky-line.

Beinn Eighe and Liathach are two of the most astonishing mountain shapes in Scotland, more astonishing because of their strange unlikeness to each other. In sunshine Beinn Eighe is the perfection of grace and strength combined, as in some colossal work of architecture, beautiful curves linking peak to peak, and sinking down to the glen in lines of flawless symmetry. But the whiteness of the quartzite gives the mountain a weird and unsubstantial look, especially in mist and storm, when it is now blotted out altogether, and now comes looming through the pallid

obscurity like a ghost. Liathach is a tremendous contrast. One compares it instinctively with Tryfaen, the most abrupt and pyramidal of southern peaks; but Liathach is much bigger and more imposing than Tryfaen. Needless to say, I was fascinated by its gloomy grandeur, enhanced by the masses of wind-shattered cloud that drove across the precipices, making them appear tenfold steeper and more appalling. The mail-gig had turned up in the nick of time, and saved me from being overwhelmed by a thrashing squall that caught us just before we entered Torridon. That little village, the nearest place for Liathach and Ben Alligin, was deprived of its inn many years ago, whether in the interests of temperance I do not know, but certainly not for the advantage of tourists, who are rigorously discouraged. The "Temperance Hotel" is not a thriving place of entertainment. In this tiny hostelry, little more than a cottage of one storey, nestling under the crags of Liathach, I spent the gloomy evening, looking across the storm-swept waters of Upper Loch Torridon to the misty and sombre hills of Shieldaig Forest, and listening to the rain-torrents lashing the roof. Liathach, I feared, was perfectly hopeless unless the weather made a sudden revolution; but I was resolved not to miss Beinn Eighe, whatever might betide. Next morning, the peat-moss at the foot of Liathach was flooded and awash with the water that had fallen in the night, and the mountain was wrapt in mist. Beinn Eighe was a shade better to look at, and at all events offered none of the unavoidable difficulties involved in a direct ascent of the other mountain from the glen.

It was in this glen that a friend of mine was stopped some time ago on the King's highway by a forester, and interrogated as to his movements, for the noxious tourist is watched here with a jealous eye, and the geologist, the mountaineer, and the poor misguided lover of nature are treated with about as much courtesy as the deer-stealer. But I was set down by the mail-driver at the deserted cottage under Beinn Eighe's slopes, without interference, at a discreet distance from certain sentinels who seemed to

be patrolling the road. Dodging a squall or two, I reached the 2000 feet level before the mist got me in its clutches, and the rest of the way to Spidean Coire nan Clach (3220 feet) was easy to find. Then a brisk succession of storms kept me prisoner for half-an-hour, at the abating of which I turned west along the ridge in search of Sail Mhòr (3217 feet) and Ruadh Stac Mor (3309 feet), both of which in the teeth of a tremendous gale, with rain and fog, I managed to locate and ascend. Between these peaks I passed twice along the edge of Coire Mhic Fhearchair, whose stupendous cliffs were a chief reason for my anxiety to explore Beinn Eighe; but the mist was so thick I could not see anything. The worst experience of the day was getting down from Ruadh Stac Mor, the Loch Maree route appearing to me, perhaps wrongly, an easier way than to return over all the other peaks. The upper part is a slope of loose quartzite, in big, jagged, shifting blocks and splinters, most of which had to be dealt with individually, and oftentimes nearly gave me the worst of it. After many hundred feet of this, a craggy slope begins, which was very slippery after the deluge. When I began to hope the bottom was near, I found myself all of a sudden on top of a sheer wall, for this end of Beinn Eighe is based on the same terraced sandstone as Liathach. Only after many ineffectual tries did I reach the bottom of this awkward cliff; but it proved the only difficult bit, and would not have been so serious but for the howling tempest. Crossing a delectable stretch of bog, where I started two blue hares, I came to the burn, which, as I expected, was in heavy spate, and cost me some trouble to ford. But then it was a pleasant surprise to find that the pony track up Glen Grudie had been extended to twice the length shown on the map, sparing me the horrors of a trackless two miles of inundated hillside.

Next day, with the usual irony of things, for it was the last of my peak-bagging trip, was one of the finest days of the whole summer, and unfortunately it had to be devoted to small game, to wit, Slioch (3260 feet) and Sgurr

a' Thuill Bhain (3053 feet). However, Slioch is a good peak for a view, and I spent an hour at the cairn very agreeably, looking at the peaks we had gathered in during our two expeditions, and at the vast number of ranges that still defied us, all illuminated and their features sharply defined by such a light and colour as we had never enjoyed in our closer acquaintance.

The Cairngorm Club