

THE
Cairngorm Club Journal.

Vol. IV.

JANUARY, 1905.

No. 24.

BEINN EIGHE.

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THIS interesting quartzite mountain, the dominating feature of the Kinlochewe valley, is rather a mountain range than a single hill. Although it dominates Kinlochewe, and presents a fine appearance thereto, yet only a small portion of it, the north-eastern spur, is visible from the village of Kinlochewe. This spur, I think, is barely 3000 feet in height, and appears to possess no distinctive appellation. I suppose it is reckoned part of Sgurr Ban, but, in my opinion, it deserves a name of its own.

If the intending climber walks from Kinlochewe a few miles along the Torridon road to reconnoitre his mountain, he will be surprised at the long ridge of white quartzite which gradually unfolds itself behind this nameless spur. From about the middle of this ridge rises the peak of Sgurr Ban (3188), looking at first sight like a snow-capped Alpine peak, especially when the quartz is glistening in the sun. Half a mile beyond Sgurr Ban is another peak of just 3000 feet, but I believe nameless; almost due north of Sgurr Ban, and separated from it by a considerable dip, is a hill of somewhat lesser height, sufficiently individualised to merit a name, although, if it have one, my map knows it not. About a couple of miles further west are the twin summits of Sail Mhor (3217) and Ruadh Stac Mhor (3309), with the deep hollow of the Coire Mhic Fhearchair, and the little loch rejoicing in the same

euphonious appellation, lying between them. All this aggregation of peaks is comprehended in the generic, all-embracing name of Beinn Eighe, though, to the unscientific eye, they would appear to divide into at least four separate and individual mountains. Ruadh Stac Mhor is the culminating point of the range; but while both it and Sail Mhor exceed Sgurr Ban in height, each, I think, is inferior to the latter in beauty and interest, although, as I attained not unto either of them, I cannot speak with authority thereon. I was undecided whether to walk along the Torridon road, and thence make straight for Sgurr Ban, or whether to attack the nameless spur, to which I have alluded, and which presents a great white face, looking quite sheer, towards Kinlochewe and Loch Maree. I finally decided upon the latter course, thinking that it would be interesting to proceed along the whole ridge. It was.

I left that comfortable hostelry, the Kinlochewe Hotel, at 8.30 a.m., and took the path which leaves the Loch Maree road just before the first burn, and strikes up the hills between Sgurr Ban and Meall a' Ghuibhais. I followed this path until I was about opposite the aforesaid white face. I had left it for circumstances to decide whether I should ascend the northern or southern ridge of the spur, thinking that the face itself was far too sheer. However, as I left the path and approached more closely to the face, it appeared, though undoubtedly very steep, still feasible, and finally I decided to strike straight up it. I very soon repented of this decision, but, having decided upon my plan of action, I stuck to it doggedly. It was, however, a far stiffer job than I had bargained for. The whole of this face—indeed, the whole of the upper regions of Sgurr Ban, except for an occasional outcrop of granite—consists of quartzite scree at a very severe angle. I hate screes at any time, but quartz screes are of all screes the most hateful. It was a magnificent, but very hot, day in early June; the rays of an almost tropical sun were reflected with peculiar intensity from the glaring white débris around me; the process of picking one's way up a

severe slope of loose razor-edged bits of quartz, constantly slipping back, and vainly clutching at other loose bits to save oneself, was agonising, heartrending. At length I reached the summit of this easternmost point of the mountain at 11.40 a.m., and was rather disgusted to find that there was no cairn, and that I had had that awful scramble for the sake of a nameless, cairnless point, which apparently did not quite reach 3000 feet. However, I set off gaily enough along the ridge for Sgurr Ban, imagining that only an easy promenade lay between me and the summit cone. In a few minutes I reached a great pile of rocks, and, climbing up these, found a sheer drop on the far side. Being merely a humble hill-walker, and not one of those climbing acrobats of whose wondrous feats we occasionally read with respectful awe, the descent thereof appeared to me impossible; so I had to come down again on the near side, pick my weary way round various shoulders of Sgurr Ban, and finally repeat the heartrending scramble up another steep quartz scree to the summit. I felt very much inclined to give it up, but, whatever betide, I felt that I must attain the summit, and stuck to it grimly until at length I reached the cairn of Sgurr Ban at 1 o'clock.

By this time I was parched with thirst; quartz always seems waterless, and I had had nothing to drink since breakfast at 7.30, except one little drop of water about 10 o'clock, just before I reached the quartz. This spoiled my day altogether. I had hoped to follow the ridge over the nameless peak marked "3000 feet" on the maps, and on to Sail Mhor, and possibly to Ruadh Stac Mhor; this would have made a grand day, and I could have done it easily enough, if only something had been available wherewith to moisten my interior. Also I had heard of some wonderful cliffs in Coire Mhic Fhearchair, which I was particularly anxious to see, but my prospects of beholding them, at any rate on this occasion, seemed remote, and I doubt whether I shall ever again summon up enough energy to tackle Beinn Eighe. I began to be seriously afraid that if I did not get some water very soon I should

collapse, and that was very undesirable. In a huge corrie on the south side of Sgurr Ban I could distinctly see a burn, and as it appeared the nearest place where I was certain of obtaining water, I set off down that awful scree again. It was farther than I had expected, and took me a good—or rather a very bad—hour to reach the water.

Directly after leaving the quartz scree I almost stepped into a tiny well about the size of a coffee cup—a most welcome sight. The author of "Benedicite" remarks in that most interesting book that, "He whose lot is cast amid the civilisation of the West can scarcely realise the feeling of thankfulness with which wells are regarded by the Oriental." On Beinn Eighe the civilisation of the West, amid which my lot seems irretrievably and unfortunately cast, contributed nothing towards the assuagement of my thirst, and I regarded wells, or at least this particular well, with feelings of very real thankfulness. Nor was this the first occasion on which wells evoked similar feelings in my bosom, and I would suggest that after the word "Oriental" in the passage quoted the following words be added—"and by those who disport themselves on Scottish mountains".

For about an hour I lingered in this attractive spot, dallying with my lunch, reluctant to leave the well. When I did at length gird myself up to bid it a fond farewell, I wandered up the corrie for some time in a rather aimless sort of way, for I could hardly make up my mind what to do. When I descended from Sgurr Ban I had given up all hopes of climbing any other peaks, and it certainly seemed hardly worth while, when I had come half-way down the mountain, to retrace the weary way, even if I had time to ascend Sail Mhor, which was very doubtful. On the other hand, it was only just 3 o'clock, and it seemed premature to turn my steps hotelwards, especially as two mighty and unconquered peaks were close at hand. I afterwards found that it was a much longer job to get down the mountain than I had supposed, and, moreover, when I reached the road at the foot thereof there was still a walk of five miles, so that if I had gone

straight down from this beneficent and ever-memorable well I should probably have only reached the hotel in comfortable time for dinner. Knowledge, however, in this world often comes too late. Fortified, too, by copious draughts from the well, with perhaps just the least admixture of mountain dew, I felt like a giant refreshed, and looked with some scorn at the ridge which rose abruptly from the back of the corrie, thinking, in my pride, that I should soon polish off that little lot. The ridge, however, was steeper and longer than it had appeared, and as I toiled slowly up it I felt permeated with regret that I had not gone straight down from the well. When I reached what had appeared to be the top of the ridge this feeling was greatly intensified, for I found that this seeming top was only a sort of shelf or ledge, and before me stretched once more a steep and glittering expanse of that hateful quartz scree. I know not why I was foolish enough to go on, for it was hardly possible now to reach Sail Mhor or any other summit, unless I meant to spend a great part of the night on the mountain, but I can never endure to turn back half-way up an ascent, unless compelled by some very strong reason, so I stuck to it doggedly and grimly. At any rate, I thought, I shall reach the top marked 3000 feet, and in the inmost recesses of my heart I believe I was even then not altogether without hopes of reaching Sail Mhor. I had still a few sandwiches left, and, although I did not mean to remain on the hills all night, it would not matter if I did not get back to the hotel until late. There were no feminine belongings there to worry about me, which is one of the inestimable privileges of single blessedness. It was early in June, and would not be dark even at midnight, as a full moon would be turned full on for my particular benefit. Wherefore, for the third time that day, I struggled disgustedly, but doggedly, up a very steep slope of quartzite scree.

When I reached the top, words utterly fail to express my disgust. I found myself on a pile of granite rocks, which formed a sort of natural cairn. The actual cairn, the summit marked 3000 feet, was only a few yards away,

and not many feet higher than the rock on which I sat, but it was separated hopelessly from me by a deep cleft in the ridge, and appeared to be attainable only by a long détour over the hateful scree. Looking towards Sail Mhor, I was obliged to admit that it was now too late to tackle it, as there was a big dip between us; it would probably take me at least an hour to reach the col, and then there was a long and weary climb to the summit; it might have been at least three miles from where I sat to the cairn of Sail Mhor, which I could just faintly distinguish against the sky, and every step would be taking me farther away from the hotel, where a bath, dinner, cooling drinks, and other Sybaritic luxuries were awaiting me. If I attempted to go on I could hardly reach the hotel before the small hours of the morning, and although, as I remarked just now, I have no feminine belongings to worry about me, still I felt that my non-appearance at dinner would be a source of great anxiety to good Mrs. Macdonald, my amiable hostess, as I had hitherto never been known to miss that festival, though I had occasionally been somewhat late. Also there was another party staying at the hotel, which included three ladies; these ladies had taken much kind interest in my little expeditions, and each night at dinner used to ask where I had been, and what I had done, and how I had fared, in a manner that was most grateful and comforting to a lonely male creature, even to one who does hug himself on his single blessedness. This is hardly an appropriate place for misogynistic reflections, otherwise I might remark that women are satisfactory enough—as a rule and speaking generally, that is—unless or until they belong to you; then their sweetness is apt to vanish. Possession kills the sweet illusion. However, I was going to observe that I feared if I did not turn up at dinner, nor during the evening, that these three ladies would experience much anxiety on my account. Truth compels me to admit that they seem to have endured the uncertainty as to my fate with much fortitude.

Anyhow I gave up all further ambitions, for that day

at any rate, in the mountaineering line; my only ambition now was to get back to the hotel, and to reach those luxuries just enumerated as soon as I possibly could. So I turned away from *Sail Mhor* and *Ruadh Stac Mhor*, which seemed to grin at me derisively, and went straight down. A glissade down the steep quartz scree played havoc with my boots, a pair of faithful old friends, which had seen much service in various parts of these islands; a long day on the *Coolins* a week later completely finished them off, and with much regret I bestowed them upon *Boots* at the *Sligachan Hotel*, but fear from his manner that he regarded them with a lack of enthusiasm.

After leaving the quartzite, which I did with devout thankfulness, I found that the rest of the descent was longer and rougher than I had quite anticipated. I met with nothing sensational and no real difficulties, but the way was rough and tiresome, and possibly I was getting a bit tired. I was also getting thirsty again, and was constrained to halt more than once at sundry infant burns. Altogether the descent was not accomplished in record time, and it was nearly 8 o'clock when at length I reached the road at the foot of the mountain, about five miles from *Kinlochewe*, and 9.30 when I entered the hotel.

Beinn Eighe is the only quartzite mountain which I have ascended, and if all quartzite mountains are girt about with screes of the same kind as those encompassing the peak of *Sgurr Ban*, I can only say that, fond as I am of Scotland and of Scottish mountains, I never want to ascend another. After a good clean-up and an excellent dinner, I almost succeeded in persuading myself that I had enjoyed the day. I had been thirteen hours absent; it had been one of the longest and hardest days that I had ever had, and the greater part of the day had been spent in toiling laboriously up and down successive quartz screes, and for all this expenditure of energy, I had only the solitary peak of *Sgurr Ban* to show as trophy.