

CHRISTMAS MONDAY ON BEN VORLICH AND STUC A' CHROIN.

BY H. MACROBERT.

WE had left Edinburgh by the 7 o'clock train from Princes Street in the chilliness of a winter morning, and it was only as we drew up at Callander station that we began fully to realise the perfect promise of a day which the pale emerald sky held out to Mackenzie and myself. A worthy member of the S.M.C. had given us some words of wisdom as to our route ere leaving town, but the crispness of the morning was too much for our youthful spirits, and, neglecting that advice, we alighted at Kingshouse at 9.35 a.m., having left our luggage at Strathyre station in charge of the hotel porter.

The heavy falls of snow which had been experienced throughout Scotland during December had led us to anticipate much sport, not only on Stuc a' Chroin, but also on her more placid if better known neighbour Ben Vorlich. It was therefore with much disappointment and no little incredulity that our sleepy eyes viewed the bare rocky bluffs of Ben Ledi's eastern face. Here, if anywhere, we argued, the snow should be lying, but beyond a few patches and one or two couloirs not a vestige was to be seen. We endeavoured to console ourselves with the thought of Stucky's greater height, but I could see that my friend was anxious notwithstanding his fair words. Moreover, his desire for corroborative evidence in the shape of Am Binnein's snow-clad cone led to most amazing contortions of body and face in his vain endeavour to see round corners! Morning mists, however, lay thick over Balquhiddier, quite obscuring the view, and we could therefore only hope for the best. We had been advised to train to Lochearnhead, and from that point strike over the hills into Glen Ample, but our desire to be afoot proved too strong for us, and accordingly, as already stated, we left the train at Kingshouse.

It was a perfect morning as we strode swiftly over the

frozen ground and up the grassy slopes glittering with hoar frost. Mackenzie had the rucksack with the provisions and rope, whilst I ambled along with a light camera. Profiting by the former experiences of others, we had an ice-axe apiece, and by general consent the sobriquet "Stucky" was strictly tabooed. As is usual, in the first 1000 feet the views claimed a large part of our time, but in this case there was ample justification. Behind us to the west lay Balquhiddar with the white mists still nestling in the hollows; at the head of the valley Am Binnein stood out clearly against a pale sky, its upper slopes streaked with snow and shimmering in the morning sun, while below all was still in shadow. Words cannot describe the infinite charm and beauty of a Highland landscape in its winter aspect. The gorgeous colouring and the perfect gradations of light and shadow are a revelation to the town dweller. There was no lack of excuse therefore for two panting climbers eager to pause awhile and have a breather, and it was with no little satisfaction that we finally surmounted the crest dividing us from Glen Ample, and called a halt in the bright morning sun. Before us lay Ben Our, Ben Vorlich (3224 ft.) and Stuc a' Chroin (3189 ft.) perfectly clear, but almost devoid of snow! It was certainly disappointing, but there was no time to be lost, so off we went at a smart trot, and soon we were indulging in copious draughts from the Ample Burn in spite of some misgivings as to their future effects. It was 10.40 when we started up the long slopes to Vorlich, and progress was now steady if somewhat slow. Mackenzie still acted the part of baggage-mule, notwithstanding my very feeble protestations, and the dogged way in which he plodded up and along was really heart-breaking to his "Herr" following patiently in the rear. We halted for lunch at the burnside in full view of the fine precipices and gulleys of Stucky, and noted with satisfaction that the latter were full of snow, while the rocks were glazed with ice and in a formidable condition. Thin wisps of mist were now, however, waving round the summit of Ben Vorlich and ever and again obscuring the warm rays of the sun. The sudden fall in temperature caused an abrupt termination to our varied lunch, and, ere we had donned our mits and

helmets, great clouds of mist were surging up from Gleann an Dubh Choirein, and rolling over the Bealach, obliterating all landmarks and chilling us to the bone. At full speed we breasted the final slopes of Vorlich, and finally came out above the mist a few feet short of the summit. Here the bold front of Stuc a' Chroin frowned savagely at us over a veritable cauldron of seething mists, making a perfect picture for the eager photographer. The camera was accordingly unpacked and the operation performed, but unhappily with indifferent success. We reached the cairn at 12.30.

The view was magnificent and fairly clear on all sides save the S.E. Ben Lomond was prominent in the S.W., then "Jean" could just be descried peeping out from behind Narnain. Ben More and Am Binnein with their graceful contours carried the eye N.W. to Ben Chaluim and the Killin hills, while due north the Ben Lawers group stood out with startling clearness. To the N.E. and E. the eye roamed over loch and hill to Ben Chonzie. Nowhere was there much snow to be seen. What there was of it on Ben Vorlich took the form of a miniature cornice on the south side. Some time was spent on the summit basking in the sun and devouring the remains of our interrupted lunch. This consisted of the usual heterogeneous collection carried by mountaineers—dates, raisins, apples, chocolates, &c. Banana sandwiches were voted a failure.

We started off for Stucky about 1.15, the mists having in the meantime entirely disappeared. Two short glissades on snow frozen as hard as concrete hastened our descent to the col. Our future plan of campaign was here under discussion, and we eventually decided to try the more northerly of two long sinuous gullies on the east face, whose lower ends terminated in a large patch of snow. To reach this a long traverse across slippery ground was necessary, but this was accomplished without mishap.

The ascent of the gully was begun at 2.15. The condition of the snow rendered step-cutting necessary throughout, so we accordingly roped and set off, taking it in turns to cut up the fifty odd feet allowed by the rope. The rocky walls which hemmed in the gully were hung with icicles and

covered with hoar-frost, and so close together as somewhat to limit the outward view. For it must be remembered that a view is of no little consideration to one standing with chilled feet in the ice-steps which are gradually filling up with the icy fragments streaming from under the axe of the busy worker above. As the sun gradually sank in the west, we looked down from our snowy staircase into the ever deepening gloom of the valley, and again across to the graceful ridge of Ben Vorlich, glowing blood-red in the rays of a winter sunset. Such views, however, were not for the leader; other matters absorbed his attention. The first serious obstacle was an awkward little pitch of not more than ten feet. The direct ascent of this proved too much for the leader, and accordingly the second man's axe was called into requisition, and a slippery but short traverse made out on the north wall. Thereafter a cautious wriggle put the leader into comparative safety, where he was soon joined by the baggage-animal. From here the slope steepened considerably, and for 150 feet must have been over 55° . At the head of this we encountered a second pitch in the form of a half-frozen waterfall. After much kicking and scraping Mackenzie managed with the aid of my head to spread-eagle himself on the crest of the ridge. Whilst endeavouring to shuffle on to a place of safety he incautiously let go his axe. His frenzied shout of despair roused me from visions of Strathyre Hotel and warm baths to the horrible reality. As the erring weapon shot past I fielded it with the precision of a "short-slip." Later when I handed it back to its owner there were tears of gratitude in Mackenzie's eyes; truly his axe is his fetish!

It was now twenty minutes to four and the top not yet in sight. We decided therefore to traverse out when opportunity occurred, and so make our way with all possible speed to the summit. It was not, however, until after another quarter of an hour's step-cutting that the leader was enabled to make his way out on to the south side of the gully, which was now no longer precipitous but comparatively simple. Thereafter a short scramble landed us on the crest of the ridge some 100 yards north of the summit. Our

exertions were rewarded with another perfect view, a sunset over the Western Highlands.

“The sun has gane down o'er the lofty Ben Lomond,
And left the red clouds to preside o'er the scene.”

Coming as we did from the comparative gloom of the eastern face, the effect of the gorgeous colouring was all the more pronounced. We had, however, little time for æsthetic reflection as it was now 4.10, and the last train was due to leave Strathyre at 6.54. So once more we set off at a trot, and were soon slipping and plunging down the icy slopes to Glen Ample. As the gradient eased off we gradually bore to our left, and finally flung ourselves, tired and breathless, on the heathery banks of the Ample Burn, a little before 5 p.m. The great black hill between us and our longed for haven loomed up like a veritable nightmare, and it was two weary travellers who panted and stumbled up through the heather and over the slippery rocks amid the gathering gloom. When at last, after many pauses, we finally surmounted the ridge, the lights of Strathyre twinkled a cheery greeting from the darkness of the valley, and roused our flagging spirits to one last effort. At 6.15. we strode jauntily into the Station Hotel, to find to our disgust that our only watch had gone slow, and that the real time was 6.30. Nothing daunted we proceeded to do a lightning change, and at 6.45. I sat down alone to the tempting repast provided by mine host. As my friend delayed his coming I felt constrained, with true Scottish economy, to take his share of the viands in addition to my own. This I did to my entire satisfaction, the tardy one appearing just in time to realise what he had missed ere rushing out to the station.

What need to expatiate on the glorious feeling of *dolce far niente* as one curls oneself up in the corner of the carriage and drowsily ruminates on the adventures and incidents of the past day! Pleasures of reflection are among the chief pertaining to the mountaineer, and sweet are the fancies of the dreamer as the rhythmical swaying of the carriage wafts him into the arms of Morpheus.