

ON BEN LEDI.

BY FRED R. COLES.

IN these globe-trotting days few ramblers would condescend to notice a hill whose summit does not touch the 3,000 feet contour-line. "Ramblers," said I? Has not the very essence of that fine old epithet vanished? Is not the idea of rambling eclipsed, annihilated by the hum-drum pages of your Bædeker, and the severe punctualities of train, and steamer, and that latest of peace-killing locomotives,—the motor-car? No one rambles nowadays, treasuring the opportunity of a rare holiday, and filling it with the simple delight in nature. Our very holidays are stamped express! The Swiss Alps, even, have lost to some extent that olden sense of altitude and danger, in the estimation of the accomplished mountaineer. And, for the many who are not mountaineers in any sense whatever, there will soon be electric cars carrying lazy and luxurious loads of so-called sight-seers on many another mountain besides the Righi.

Yet the spirit of adventure, in the truest acceptation of the term, still glows in the breasts of some rare souls to whom a day amid the Perthshire hills comes as a draught of exhilarating delight, restorative and memorable for all time. So, at least, thought two of us—free for one glorious day to ramble whither we liked, and, being naturally fond of a combination of wildness and beauty, Perthshire and Ben Ledi swam across our mental vision. Where else, the wide world over, will you find just this perfection of those two potent landscape characteristics? Add to this that to one of us early and dear associations hallow the scenery around Callander, and that to the other the ascent of Ben Ledi meant his initiation into the art of hill-climbing, and you have reason enough to understand something of the thrill of excitement with which we trod the Leny road, on one of the sunniest afternoons of July.

What an eye-filling picture as we near the Pass, and, with the delicate veil of midsummer haze magnifying its noble contours, the Sentinel of the Highlands looms in front, purple-grey and lofty!

We took it very easy, loitering when the birchen shadows welcomed us to rest, lying prone on the bog-myrtle-edge of the road near Coire a' Chrombie, gazing with a renewal of passionate delight on every scar and crag, blue, hollow and sunlit precipice,—so familiar once—of yonder superbly modelled Stank Hill, whose base sleeps to-day in the steel-blue stillness of winding Loch Lubnaig.

What colour, what Mendelssohnesque architectonic phrasing, so to speak, glorifies that hill:—an expanse, at once so broad, so high, and so replete with rocky secrets, that, were Ben Ledi not at hand, it would hold us with its fascination for this one whole day.

We struck up athwart Creag an t'Sionnaich (are there any foxes there now, we wonder?) and so, over deliciously damp mossy slopes, into the Stank Glen, spending a refreshing half-hour all but in the linn at the foot of the great fall—sprayed over by its musical downpour. Quitting its cool shades with regret, we slowly wound our way to a point beyond Creag na Caorach, where the huge boulders of Steall Buidhe—the torrent yellow-red with iron oxide—confront and frown fantastic upon the intruders. We cannot by this route be said to “climb Ben Ledi straight,” as did the Grahame; but it is, in part, straight enough and rocky enough to force into play muscles that neither walking nor even rowing completely exercise. And if you “want it taken out of you,” strip yourself of those superfluties which Princes Street exacts as indispensable parts of your costume; sling jackets at the ends of your sticks, and then, pressing upwards against an angle of sixty degrees, you will in ten minutes' climbing derive more benefit than a course of Turkish baths can afford, and under what invigorating conditions.

The boulders and split conglomerate fragments, moreover, lie in such interminable confusion, their edges so concealed by mosses and patches of the Mountain Lady's Mantle, that

a careless step might end in a sprain or fracture. Towards the upper fort-like rock barrier, on reaching the height of about 2,300 feet, where all the west was shut out by the great semicircular ridge forming the summit of Ben Ledi, we stayed our climb. Only the loftiest hill tops appeared above the level banks of grey mist now rapidly growing into shape out of the inchoate haze that had beautified the day.

For that we care not; we do not climb this hill for mere extent of view, or to number the peaks visible; we are not attempting a record against time; we are prepared to sleep on the summit, if need be, and we hug ourselves with the thought that it is all novelty, strenuous delight, the manliest sport known, and that not one of our friends knows of our adventure. What poor things seem cricket, and cycling, and that mania for hunting lost balls called "gowf," when we are high up among clouds and crags!

From the coign of vantage above suggested, however, the whole great broadened-out expanse of the Stank Hill sleeps in serene sunshine, curving north-westwards into the shadowy mysteries of Creag na h'Iolaire (eagle's crag), where the gloom is broken by a single long strip of silver; that is the Sput Ban or White Spout. What a sight that great hollow must be after an October storm!

To-day the merest zephyr is stirring, hardly stirring, the brown-golden capitals of the rushes, and the only sounds are mellow bleatings from those far away dots of white which are so commingled with stones that, till they move, we don't recognise them as lambs. Little wonder the lonely moorland shepherd folk call stone circles "the grey wethers!"

Hark! there is another sound; a quick reiterated note, hardly melodious, more as if a thin metal rod were made to strike the edge of a rock five or eight times in a second. What creature breaks the silence, and adds this monotonous ditty to the tinkle of the rivulets as they sing through the sedges towards Loch Lubnaig? There it is—a Ptarmigan is it, taking alarm at our approach?

Here are the dewy, damp Hypnum beds, and Sphagnum-turbaries; we greet once again—after long years—such beautiful plants as the Starry Saxifrage, and the Green

Spleenwort, and the Alpine Dock (*Oxyria reniformis*); and there, in the wettest of cushiony mosses, starts up the deep violet-petalled Butterwort (*Pinguicula Lusitanica*), its viscous fleshy leaves set flat, like a vegetable starfish, and within those sticky over-curling leaf edges there are the helpless midges and their bigger congeners half-dissolved and ready to be speedily absorbed.

Turning the flank of a quite precipitous range of towering rocks, right above, a huge half-detached pinnacle, oddly resembling Meg Merrilees, threatens us with instant dismissal. By canny manoeuvring we succeed in circumventing her and reach a point above, whence her precarious and airy posture seems more unsubstantial than ever—almost as if a good push would send her clattering into the valley a thousand feet below.

But the waning light warns us; we are yet only at the base of the summit corrie, with six hundred feet of rugged ridge-work before us. And what a ridge it is! Not for danger, be it understood; Helvellyn beats it for that. Not even for the view, but for itself, its beautiful sweeping upward curve to Mullach Buidhe, thence away in a deep semicircle, south and south-east, to the gently ascending line of the summit; and what a depth! six hundred feet, sheer, do the cauldron-like sides of this corrie drop down—rock, from top to base; scarred, water-riven, frost-split, and yet, as a whole, converging in sternest radiations from periphery to centre.

As we followed the curve round the final quarter of a mile, we donned the superfluous garments; and at the cairn we rested, wrote post cards (which there was no means of despatching till next day) and consumed the edible contents of our knapsacks with the consciousness of a well-earned meal.

Out of the east, between far Ben Voirlich and the high moorlands near Comrie, the mists were swiftly stealing upon us; double-topped Ben Vane, on the north-west, showed almost black against the sheeny sunset; distant cones of ghostly grey seemed to suggest Ben More and Ben Lomond; and, due north, in a hollow between much greater heights,

Ben Sithean, the Fairies' Hill, was being wrapped up in a white witchery of cloud that every minute grew higher and higher, transforming this one hill into a snowy Alp in miniature. Is it so every night, we wondered? Why should that one hill, a mere hillock of 1800 feet among the Bens encircling it, attract to itself such a wealth of mist? No one can tell. It is Nature; that is all we can say. Why, again, should that dark and deep cavern-like mountain-side on the south of Ben Bhreac suddenly, in one instant (it seems), be cleft in twain by a long sword of flashing white mist? Who sheathes that sword again, and leaves the mountain recesses gloomier than before? Why in one valley should the mist sleep as it were, level as a lake, whose wavelets just fret the rocky darkness into a serrated shore, while, in another valley hard by, the same mist rolls up like smoke from an abysmal deep? It is Nature, and we know nothing.

At seven minutes after sunset we began our descent; first over Meall Odhar, and then, leaving the frail fence that marks the track to Coilantogle, ran down an easy slope to be abruptly brought to pause almost on the verge of Creag Ghorm, at whose base, 1000 feet below, the mist was already bewilderingly thick.

During the afternoon no signs of the precipitous Creag Ghorm were visible, the whole east shoulder of Ben Ledi being shrouded in haze. This sudden break in our downward course, therefore, was rather more than a surprise; it was a shock with a thrill in it, not to be felt anywhere else! And the crags extended right and left in one unbroken phalanx, the extremities vanishing in the mist. What were we to do? As we stood awe-struck, the vast column of mist seemed to compress itself, becoming whiter and denser, and then the filmy edges of Creag Ghorm waxed hard and sharp and stood out black as Erebus. We stood on the very brink of the planet itself—the next step, were that possible, would land us in the gulf! . . . And, for one fearful moment, we felt the weird fascination of the unfathomable abyss . . . to fling ourselves over. Just at this psychical moment, however, the sharp bang of a shutting door was heard—this is fact not fancy. "We are not so far away after all," said I, in reassur-

ing tones; "that must be the good folk of Coire a' Chrombie closing up for the night. How the mist carries the sound! Still, the house is almost a mile away, and 1800 feet lower than where we are standing. It will take us all our time to reach the road before it is quite dark." As I spoke, the vast white nothingness in front diminished; and, far away, it seemed, to the south, the crags appeared to "run out" into the level of the slope on which we stood, and, in the broad hollow below, the channel of the Coire a' Chrombie burn could for a brief moment be espied. For it we made, down to it we scrambled, across it we struggled in the fast deepening dusk; and, after numerous slight mishaps and slips in the boggy ground, safely reached the road after ten o'clock. We had just reversed the method of the Grahame and had clomb *down* Ben Ledi straight!

Without the least intention of marring our own reminiscences of this noble Perthshire hill, some points of interest with regard to its nomenclature may be glanced at. In nearly all the older books, and necessarily therefore in all modern guide books, the meaning of Ben Ledi is given as "Mountain of God." In Robertson's Gaelic Topography of Scotland there is a page which is instructive as showing to what lengths a pet theory will carry a man. Robertson's pet theory was that the Druids inhabited Scotland in Pagan times. Here is the account of Ben Ledi:

"Beinn-le-dia or 'the hill of God,' that is the god Bel or Baal, who thus had this mountain specially dedicated to him; and, according to the universal tradition of the country, it was here, on Beltane-day, that the whole people of the adjacent country assembled to worship this deity, and receive from their Druids the *Teine eigin*, that is 'the need fire or fire of exigency;' the heathen custom being to put out their fires throughout the whole neighbourhood, and have them relighted from the sacred fire of the god Bel, on his day, namely, on the Beltane day or first of May, which was also considered the first day of summer, when this solemn meeting took place on the top of Ben Ledi. Any one who has ever been at its summit must have noticed how very different it is there from almost every other Highland

mountain ; instead of a mere heap of bare stones or rocks, it is remarkably verdant, having been evidently cleared of stones and smoothed by the hand of man, which is fully accounted for by its Gaelic name, and which though undoubtedly given more than two thousand years ago it is still at this hour [in] the language of the Highlanders of Scotland Another clear corroboration in regard to the heathen sanctity of this mountain is, that on its north side, there is a hollow called in Gaelic *Coire an Fhaidh*, or 'the prophet's dell,' being undoubtedly of Pagan origin, as no one in Christian times could possibly pretend to foretell future events ; but it is most consistent with the heathen name given to this mountain."

A most ingenious, though, we venture to think, quite illogical conclusion !

Let us examine this pretty theory. First, if the word for God, *Dia* or *Di*, did exist in this mountain name, the stress would have been laid upon it, and the name would have been sounded something like Ben-le-Dée. But it never is so accented. Next, *le* does not mean "of" but "with ;" and it does not occur in any place-name in Scotland, in the sense ascribed to it by Robertson. Again, who knows what language the pre-historic Pagans spoke ? It is merely assumed that it was Gaelic. Then, *Di* being, according to the Robertsonian hypothesis, the word for "God," it is of course Bel, and, because Bel, or Baal, was the God of Fire and Heat, therefore, these Pagans of ancient Callander not only assembled on this mountain summit to light fires, but actually smoothed the summit for this purpose ! Lastly, to make the picture complete, the Robertsonian hypothesis plants a Seer or Prophet (Druid of course !) in the corrie we have just been describing, which this Gaelic writer, unlike his accurate ancestors, miscalls a "dell," forgetful of its depth, its savage ruggedness, its perpetual exposure to every storm and countless torrents all the year round ! Why, even the sternest of the early Christian anchorites would blench at the bare thought of dwelling *there* !

A modern Gael of a very different mental calibre has supplied an excellent and suggestive explanation of the name Ben-Ledi. The latter half of the name is a corrupted form

of the word *Leoidean*, which is the plural of *Leathad* or *Leothaid*, a declivity, a ridge. The name would thus read Mountain of ridges or slopes. How accurately this describes Ben-Ledi, all who make the ascent from the south will readily acknowledge, remembering, at the same time, Scott's perfect line, "There, ridge on ridge, Ben-Ledi rose."

The summit corrie, cauldron-like, and tempest-battered as we have shown it to be, bears possibly a choice of epithets in the Gaelic, neither of which is remotely connected with a Prophet or a Druid. One suggested explanation is that the name is *Coire nam Fiadh*, Corrie of the Deer; and the other *Coire nan Aidh*, the root idea being that of vastness, terrible-ness—again, not an inappropriate epithet for this great deep circular corrie.

Precisely a mile to the N.N.W. of the summit of Ben Ledi lies a small sheet of water, *Lochan nan Corp*, about which a gruesome tale is related. Many years ago a funeral party started from Glenfinglas, in midwinter, to lay the remains to rest in the little churchyard of the Chapel of St. Bride at the foot of Loch Lubnaig. They wound their way up through Gleann Casaig, meaning to descend by Stank Glen, probably the easiest hill-route then accessible. Whether out of a spirit of adventure, or through being bewildered, the whole party, numbering at least several scores, set foot on the frozen surface of the Lochan. The ice gave way suddenly, and every one was drowned. Hence the name *Lochan nan Corp*, the Little Loch of the dead bodies. Take that as one out of many weird and thrilling incidents recorded as having occurred on these cold and lonely heights. What others could not some of the older folk have told! Even now, if you grow acquainted with the shepherds, there will be stories enough and to spare—felt all the more keenly as the rock, or the glen, or the waterfall by which the fairies danced, or some human tragedy was enacted, is pointed out by the simple speaker, as you ramble with him amid the rocks and mosses of Ben Ledi.