

## AT THE HEAD OF LOCH MAREE.

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FROM my bedroom window at Kinlochewe hotel I could see the south-east face of Slioch. For more than a week I had been ridge-walking in Kintail and Gairloch, and on Mam Soul, Scour Ouran and Ben Eighe had met with such hard treatment from wind, mist and rain that my mind was made up to be off home the first thing next morning, unless the mountains appeared absolutely clear. There was hardly a speck of mist on Slioch when I rose, so at 8.45 I started out, intending to drive to Achnasheen on my return, and catch the evening train.

Slioch rises abruptly at no great distance across the glen, yet to reach the base a wide circuit has to be made, although I have heard it stated that a short cut can be made by fording the river. As I saw the stream that morning I should as soon think of fording Loch Maree. An egregious example of a guide-book, dated 1900, shows an excellent main road running past the foot of Slioch, along the shores of Loch Maree right to Poolewe. I should like to take the compiler of this imaginative compendium with me along the alleged road. As a matter of fact, there never was a road, and the track is so rough and so little used that often one loses sight of it for a hundred yards together—it is the rudest of cattle-tracks. At the farm of Culinellan, I enquired what was the shortest way to Fasagh, the next point marked on the Ordnance map. One man had never heard the name, another just remembered it. No wonder! When I got to Fasagh, once, no doubt, a thriving sheep-farm, I found it represented by the foundations of walls, hardly a single stone remaining on another. Slioch has recently been incorporated in the deer forest, but I saw no deer, and no stalkers, whilst I did see a number of sheep grazing on the mountain.

My time allowance of one hour to the foot of Slioch was exceeded, chiefly through the treacherous behaviour of the

pretended road, which conducted me into a net-work of marsh and stream where a large burn joins the river. This burn comes over the crags of Meall-an-Ghobhar in a bouncing cascade, but is not such a gallant waterfall as that draining the tarns on Beinn a'Mhuinidh, which drops over Creag Roy. This imposing cliff, not named on the one inch map, runs in a beetling and apparently unscalable wall round the flanks of Beinn a'Mhuinidh; it is the grand rock mass that is seen from far away down Loch Maree, and runs on with hardly a break up one side of Glen Banasdail. Down through Glen Banasdail, that abrupt fissure, a rude gash in the earth's surface, separating Slioch from the crowd of hills to the east, tumbles the river draining Lochan Fada, the long lake behind Slioch. It hurtles along its deep chasm, with hardly a pause from end to end, whirlpool and waterfall treading on each other's heels. Where the track crosses it by a wooden bridge, a splendid fall leaps into a deep crag-girt cauldron,

"With whiteness and fury  
Occupied partly, but mostly pellucid, pure, a mirror."

Had my time not been so short, I should never have resisted the temptation to linger and bathe.

The ordinary way up Slioch rounds the south-east buttress up Smiorsair, and thence clambers up the continuously steep face and the scree gullies, straight to the summit. Noticing a well-beaten track that leaves the pretended road above the ruins of Fasagh and ascends Glen Banasdail, I followed it, to save walking through the heather and moss-hags, looking out for an opportunity to strike up the mountain. My plan was to enter Slioch's one great corrie, a rectangular hollow overlooking this glen, with the ridge of Meall Each and its two camel humps on one side, Sgurr an Tuill Bhàin on the other, and the steep flank of Slioch at the head of it.

Less than a mile up the glen, I took advantage of the great bare slabs outcropping above the track, and affording firm and pleasant footing among the bogs and heather, to begin the climb in earnest. There were intervals of bogs and scree, and then more slabs. Then, having sat down but once since leaving the hotel, I reached the 1750 ft. contour line

and found myself in the corrie. The bottom is remarkably flat between the enclosing steeps; it is boggy and rock strewn. I scrambled up the side of the camel-humped ridge, just where it abuts upon Slioch. At the top of the ridge are two fine tarns that do not appear on the map, the end of Slioch's main ridge towering grandly above them. The water that wells out a little below the tarns is quite drinkable; indeed there are shallow pools on the very top of Slioch that may afford a drink, although they are deficient in oxygen.

A glorious view of Loch Maree and the opposite mountains, supreme among them Ben Eighe, had arisen suddenly as my head came over the ridge; it promised something exceptional in the way of panoramas for the summit. So with redoubled ardour I braced myself for the final pull. Any one who has seen this side in contour from Loch Maree will have a good idea of the exertion it means. It is as steep as a hill can be without tumbling down in precipices, and to the left and right of this narrow end the sides descend with similar abruptness. With muscles hardened by half a score of peaks, and wind in good order, I went up the last 600 ft. without a stop. The steepness ends all at once, and an easy up and down ridge begins, widening out into a sandy plateau. Next a hump or two intervenes, and then there is a slight descent before the cairn heaves into sight on the extreme corner of the mountain, the western precipice on the left and the northern precipice on the right, only a few feet away. For some unknown reason, the cairn does not stand on the true summit, although the elevation of its site, 3217 ft., is usually given as the official height of Slioch. The real top is at a little distance to the south, where the one inch map shows a very small contour of 3250 ft. Careful measurement with the aneroid, we are told on excellent authority, gives the height of the mountain as 3260 ft. However, the cairn is the better point for the view, which is one of the finest for quality and extent in all the Highlands.

Slioch is cut off all round by lakes or deep hollows, like a moated keep. Along its most extensive side and far away towards the western seaboard spread the shining reaches of

Loch Maree, so thickly studded with islands in one part that the lake is turned into a network of silver threads. A smaller sheet of water, Loch Garbhaig, lies embosomed among the hills under the northern face, and along the north-eastern, Lochan Fada pours out its clear blue water for four miles, with gnarled crags and far-flung ramparts of cliff hemming it narrowly in on either side. On the fourth side of Slioch is the rugged cutting of Glen Banasdail, carrying Lochan Fada's overflow into Loch Maree.

It was the clearest view I had enjoyed throughout my holiday. In one part of the measureless circumference, it is true, the mountain shapes were hazy and confused, still struggling to disengage themselves from the clinging mists; the Achnashellach peaks and the wild heights of Monar and Kintail were like tossing waves of mist, ready, seemingly, to shake and dissolve at the touch of the breezes. But Torridon-way and seaward, north toward An Teallach and east toward the Fannich Hills, all was clear and fair. Ben Eighe's naked cones of light-coloured quartzite and purple sandstone rose in splendour from the gloom and profundity of the dark-green woods that climb a thousand feet up from the lochside, a deep blue in the hollows and chasms, their strong lights and shadows softened by a thin, impalpable haze. Liathach, though higher, was almost completely hidden by the red western peaks, Ruadh-Stac Mòr and Sail Mhòr, which I had climbed in mist and tempest a day ago. Ben Alligin, down by Loch Torridon, a fine, interesting mountain on this side, made me think for awhile that I was looking at Liathach. At the opposite point of the compass were the rarely trodden mountains of central Ross, the Fannichs, a wild concourse of summits with two noble lakes in their midst, and the northern Ben Dearg with his satellites. Most fascinating of all to me, for old acquaintance sake, were the Challich Hills, or An Teallach, the citadel of Dundonnell Forest. Great 3000-footers spring up to east and west, but between them a broad valley opens right to the mountains, permitting one to survey their grand proportions from foot to crown. The sun came out, and all their crags shone red and purple, right up to the jagged pinnacles on their crest, Corrag Bhuidhe, the

most fantastic sky-line on the British mainland. The eye roved from peak to peak, and explored depth beyond depth, among the gigantic masses of gloom and splendour that lay around, until it was drawn subtly westward by the spell of the ocean and the isles.

Slioch itself, seen from a distance, looks attractive to rock-climbers ; part of it, in fact, appears wholly impossible. On two sides the peak is guarded by great rock-stacks, separated from each other by scree-filled gullies. Grand as they are, they would probably not offer serious difficulties to a climber. From Slioch a ridge runs east to Sgurr a' Tuill Bhain, 3058 ft., a short mile away, whence the view is pretty much the same as that from Slioch. Down beyond Gairloch, the sky had darkened over the sea ; a heavy squall was coming inland. I watched it march steadily up Loch Maree, extinguishing the sunlit hills ; but I did not wait to see it storm Slioch. Running down the easy slopes, picking my way across the corrie, and making as near a straight line as I could for the bridge at Fasagh, I was back beside Loch Maree in 40 minutes. By now the squall had vanished with a mere sprinkling of rain-drops, the sun was overhead, and the fishermen hard at it in the boats, flogging the water for mythical fish, made angling look an exceedingly dull and tedious sport. Through a mistake of the hotel people, I had to tramp the ten miles up Glen Docherty and past Loch Rosque, a walk that would have been as tiresome as fishing without a rise, had it not been for the retrospective view of Loch Maree, and then the stately procession of the Coulin Forest peaks. Ben Eithe also came into view at one point ; but the thing that impresses itself most on the memory as the dominating feature of the miles beside Loch Rosque was the graceful isolated cone of Scurr Vuillin, most alluring to the mountaineer, although it falls considerably short of the 3000 ft. level of conventional respectability.