

A STORMY AFTERNOON ON BEINN A' BHEITHIR.

BY HUGH STEWART.

"Six o'clock! Get up, you brutes," said the low-level man to the recumbent forms of the ultramontane and the salvationist. But the sleeping-bags moved not, so the low-level man, conscious of having done his duty, replaced his watch and returned to his slumbers. Silence reigned over the camp. About two hours later the salvationist was awakened by the furious patter of rain. Rolling on to the low-level man, he asked the time. "Six o'clock," said the latter unhesitatingly. But the knowledge gained by experience prompted the salvationist to consult his watch. Then he crawled from his sleeping-bag, and disrobed his wrathful companions, heedless of appeals, promises, execrations. The ultramontane glanced resignedly at the motionless pall of mist which enshrouded Aonach Dhu. "What a beast of a day!" said he; "I fear we can't do Beinn Fhionnlaidh and Beinn Sguliaird, after all." For the accomplishment of this expedition, the low-level man had been instructed to arouse the camp at six o'clock. But the ultramontane had never shown fervent enthusiasm to visit these little known mountains. They boasted not of rocks unscaleable, of serrated ridge or spiry pinnacle. They offered not in corrie or precipice sport such as delighted the northern gods:—

The gods arose and took
Axes and ropes, and at their head came Thor;
Forth went they and they drove their steeds before;
And up the dewy mountain tracks they fared
To the deer-forests, in the early dawn,
And up and down, and side and slant they roamed.

Therefore the pessimistic bodings of the ultramontane were disregarded. Nevertheless, optimism was chilled by the sound of the rain falling, not with a pleasing music of tones and soft undertones made various by a freshening breeze, but exhibiting a form of that monotonous dogged deter-

mination which ever excites horror in all right-thinking breasts. Over Loch Triochatan brooded a thick darkness, and the glen was sombre as if morning yielded reluctantly to his lover night's entreaties, "Lie still, O Love, lie still." Unfavourable indeed were the weather conditions to attempts at exploration and photography. The party found consolation in a leisurely breakfast, to which succeeded the pleasures offered by tobacco, cards and light literature; and anon with praiseworthy energy they sought for wisdom in the pages of Plato and photographic manuals.

Thus the slow hours crept on; and the heavens spared not their tears. About noon, however, an east wind came moaning down the glen, and swept the rain-clouds out to sea. The day was still disagreeable, and the wind soon became a hurricane; but the low-level man had tried every imaginable position, and found all equally uncomfortable. Something, he thought, must be done; and he proposed that the party should bike down to Ballachulish, to recruit their fast diminishing larder. The salvationist greeted the plan enthusiastically; and, with a wild hope in his heart, he secretly gathered together map, flask and compass. The ultramontane, however, now reclining luxuriously on his back, his helmeted head pillowed on a rucksack, a cigarette poised daintily between his lips, his person swathed in the folds of three sleeping-bags, every fold emanating comfort and felicity, declined the proposal emphatically. Thus after lunch his friends left him in solitary possession of the camp.

Down the glen the wind bore them past lone Loch Triochatan, past Clachaig and the grim gully fronting it, whose blackness conjured up before the salvationist's mind certain unpleasant memories. Past the scene of the massacre they swept, and gaily encountered those dangers which in Glencoe village are produced by innumerable restful dogs, restless hens and half-clad children. Then, as they reached the slate bridge at the end of Ballachulish, a sudden vision of Beinn a' Bheithir recalled his sinister designs to the salvationist's heart. For framed in by the wet black sides of the bridge soared the stately sombre cone, toying with a

delicate veil of mist whose graceful folds fluttered in the wind. The mountain's glorious appearance from the Aonach Eagach ridge, from Kinlochewe, from Sgor na h' Ulaidh, came pressing the claim; and finally the salvationist chanced to recollect that it boasted of two Munroes. Resistance to the call of the mountain spirit was no longer possible.

He informed the low-level man of the amazing discovery that there were in his pocket a map, a compass, a flask. And he waxed poetical and said, "Yonder is a hill worthy of thy climb." * To Byron replied Wordsworth: "Mine is a soul whose master bias leans to home-felt pleasures and to gentle scenes. These Beinn a' Bheithir knoweth not; yet to shame the ultramontane shall I ascend." And thus on the salvationist's designs fortune smiled serenely.

Disposing of their bikes, they turn up Gleann a' Fhiodh, and make for the narrow pinnacled ridge to the south-east of Coire Raibhach which leads to Sgorr Ban. They begin to mount steadily, but the low-level man is evidently somewhat out of condition. His aesthetic admiration for the curves of Bidean increases as he ascends; yet it cannot be satisfied without stopping. Therefore he stops. On a few yards, and once more he fain would worship at the shrine of beauty. These halts become longer and more frequent; but the salvationist turns his eyes away and assumes a blissful ignorance. At last his friend stops dead, and suggests lunch. Lunch is taken. They advance once more. But the low-level man's countenance is troubled. Finally he intimates his wish to descend. The salvationist stoops to bribe. Black balls, tobacco, whisky are offered and accepted. But they change not the low-level man's design; and the defrauded donor is left solitary and lamenting.

He stifled his sorrow however by struggling up the slope, and soon emerged on the top of the ridge, where the wind with tempestuous buffetings stormed and howled defiance in the name of Beinn a' Bheithir. It summoned the witchery of mists to magnify ten feet rocks into hundred feet pitches of appalling steepness, to thrust the summit far into the lurid clouds, or bury it in darkness. Now with sudden

* cf. The Giaour l. 146. "Man was worthy of thy clime."

fierceness it blew, as the salvationist tackled a small pinnacle, swelling out his waterproof to balloon-like billows, and all but hurling the sacrilegious intruder into well-merited abysses; now with a vision of great cliffs blocking the way in front, it deluded him into descending on the treacherous scree in Coire Raibhach. But that was its last triumph. The entrapped salvationist found breath to hum—

Le vent qui vient à travers la montagne
M' a rendu fou.

The ridge was regained without much difficulty, and easy scrambles led to the Sgorr Beinn top. A few minutes rest, then a cautious crawl on all fours along the narrow wind-swept eastern ridge, a rush up interminable misty screes, and hurrah! the top of Sgorr Dhearg.

What a magnificent view! Across the sun-kissed sea Garven flings itself defiantly into the blue sky; below smiles Loch Leven, radiant with silvery ripples; from every side the mountains and little hills clap their hands in welcome; here soaring solitary, there in close-knit clusters, round-shouldered and precipitous, of delicate subtle contours or fantastic mouldings that take the heart by storm, bathed each and all in wealth of harmonious colours with grey and purple predominating. All this and more was visible to the eye of faith; to the wretched human organ there were present but mist and screes; and mist and screes do not form an entirely satisfactory picture. Therefore, without delay, a descent was made to the col leading to Sgorr Dhonuill. Here shelter was sought on the lee side of a great boulder, and the sodden remains of lunch carefully consumed.

Overhead, Sgorr Dhonuill arose in awesome slopes through the mist, a perpendicular knife-edge separating an A.P. from an O.H. rock wall. Truly a distressful picture for a lonely salvationist! Nature had fashioned here her marvels with no trembling hand; yet the salvationist, no longer a victim of mist magic, was not dismayed. He lay listening to the roar of the wind which raged with furious choked mutterings through the gap between the mountains, with glance directed now on surf-broken Loch Leven, now on the mist racing along Sgorr Dhonuill. In that delightful book,

"Tess of the D' Urbervilles," the heroine says somewhere, "I don't know about ghosts, but I do know that our souls can be made to go outside our bodies when we are alive. A very easy way to feel 'em go is to lie on the grass at night, and look straight up at some big bright star; and by fixing your mind upon it, you will soon find that you are hundreds and hundreds of miles away from your body, which you don't seem to need at all." A certain similar mental experience may be gained by lying solitary on a silent hill-side, and gazing on mists and mountain fastnesses; but to get to the top of Sgorr Dhonuill the body was too obviously needed. So the soul was recalled to its cell. The salvationist arose with a shiver; and the precipitous knife-edge was found to be a broad slope rising at a fairly easy angle.

Mist, wind, and a violent shower of hail welcomed him effusively on the summit. He tore himself away, however, and once more made for the col. Then turning to the north down Gleann a' Chaolais, whose grassy carpet was most astonishingly wet, he trudged steadily along the road to Ballachulish quarries. At once he sought his bike, and amid gathering gloom groped his way up Glencoe. Mists hung motionless now, clasping the wet hillsides in a close embrace, the Coe sent a voice of wailing through the glen, and a soft drizzle came stealing down through the darkness. But in the salvationist's soul there rioted the hill-lover's exuberant joy, "*Cras amet qui nunquam amavit, quique amavit cras amet.*"

As he reached Auchtriochatan the low-level man's voice was borne out on the night. "I hope you haven't forgotten the bread."

"Oh!——!" said the salvationist.

[The cluster of mountains grouped under the name of Beinn a' Bheithir is set in the angle formed by Loch Linnhe and Loch Leven. A certain isolation lends an additional charm to their grandeur. Of the five peaks of the group, Creag Ghorm (2372), a long broad ridge, is set in the extreme N.W. corner overlooking Ballachulish pier. Its slopes are covered luxuriantly with trees and rise fairly steeply. It forms the usual route to the very fine top, Sgorr Dhonuill (3284), with which it is connected by one of those broad ridges so characteristic of the Cairngorm group, but not so frequently met with on the wilder western hills. Sgorr Dhonuill, the second highest peak of the group,

presents bold crags to the North, and looks extremely impressive from Gleann a' Chaolais. Into this glen, from its E. slope descending steeply to the col between itself and Sgorr Dhearg (3362), it thrusts a craggy buttress, Sgorr a' Chaolais, whose serrated ridge might possibly offer sport. Sgorr Dhearg, the highest peak, is not so precipitous as Sgorr Dhonuill—a sharp narrow peak covered with the most dreary quartzite screes imaginable. From it a long ridge stretches N. to Loch Leven, bounding Gleann a' Chaolais on the E. as Creag Ghorm does on the W. Another ridge connects it with the most easterly top, Sgorr Ban (3104); between the two peaks lies the remarkably impressive Coire Giubhsachain. Another corrie, Coire Raibhach, on the N.E. of Sgorr Ban, contains some cliffs, and is bounded on the S.E. by a ridge running down to the cart track in Gleann a' Fhiodh. This somewhat desolate glen, through which the river Laroch seeks Loch Leven, forms the Eastern boundary of the group. For a detailed account see *S.M.C.J.*, Vol. 7, No. 38, to which the foregoing remarks are much indebted.

The mountain is not a deer-forest, and hence can be climbed with a clear conscience at all periods of the year. As said above, the ordinary route starts up the steep slopes of Creag Ghorm; but its tediousness and tameness make it an altogether unworthy introduction to Beinn a' Bheithir. If a rock climb is not intended, possibly the most interesting route would be to go up the finely wooded Gleann a' Chaolais, scramble up the steep face of Sgorr a' Chaolais, and gain Sgorr Dhonuill by what as seen through mist looked an interesting castellated ridge. Thence turn E. to Sgorr Dhearg and Sgorr Ban, descending to Ballachulish quarries by the pinnacled ridge to the S.E. of Coire Raibhach, by which the ascent described above was made.]