

AN APRIL ASCENT OF BEN NEVIS.

BY ALFRED D. SMITH.

THE weather at the beginning of April, this year, was phenomenally fine, so it was with high hopes, though tempered by a slightly falling barometer, that I set out on the afternoon of the 12th of that month, from the Waverley Station, Edinburgh, northward bound, to carry out a pre-arranged climb on Ben Nevis. The route down the West Highland line is unsurpassed among railway journeys in this country, so that the six and a half hours' run was full of interest and ever-increasing delight. In due course Fort William was reached, and glowing accounts were received of the glorious weather that had recently been experienced.

After such exceptional conditions it was somewhat disappointing, the next morning, to see the aspect overhead dull and threatening, but 7.50 a.m. saw us, a party of three, hoping for the best, set our faces to the well-known Ben, taking the advice of an old native, who, when consulted as to the state of the weather, remarked that we had better go—for it would be no better.

Bearing up Glen Nevis we passed Achintee at 8.30, taking the Tourist path a few yards further on to the left, and then commenced the ascent. After rising about 500 feet from this point a fine view of Glen Nevis is obtained, which was rendered more impressive by the considerable amount of snow on the hills in the background, forming part of the Mamore Forest. At about 1400 feet above sea level the path turns North-east by East, away from Glen Nevis, and at 1800 feet we were level with the first patch of snow, the atmosphere here becoming sensibly colder and the sky more overcast. After another 100 feet the path was discarded, and tracks were made for Lochan Meall an t-Suidhe, which was gained at 10 a.m., when, bearing in mind Whymper's recommendation as to eating every two or three

hours, a halt was called, and the not disagreeable task of lightening the weight of the knapsacks commenced, the keen air giving a fine relish to the jam sandwiches, raisins, chocolate, etc., contained therein.

At 10.30 we were skirting the western side of the loch, all the hills being by this time enveloped in heavy mist and rain beginning to fall. Rounding the loch's northern end the course was due East to the Allt a' Mhuilinn Glen, the driving mist and rain making the prospect a dismal one. Traversing the northern side of Carn Dearg, heavy patches of snow being now crossed, a descent of 150 feet or so was made into the Glen, up which we proceeded, following the burn side, our object being to gain the summit of the Ben by an ascent to the Carn Mor Dearg arête at the head of the Glen. With the exception of a halt and rest behind a big rock, when the wet was a little worse than usual, steady progress was made, and at 12 o'clock we were at the 2,500 feet level, where a second lunch was discussed. The snow here was lying everywhere, and, to our no small satisfaction, the descending rain turned to the same element. It got deeper and harder as we advanced, and the declivity steeper, and about 300 feet higher the ice axes came into play. At this point roping was advisable, and, after this operation, we pressed onward and upward, with the snow driving strongly from behind. Progress was now considerably slower. The surface of the snow was frozen hard and slippery, and for the next 1000 feet every step had to be cut with the axe. The situation was wild and Alpine in the extreme. Our coats froze stiff like boards, and the rocks, looming at intervals through the mist, gave a weird grandeur to the scene that one can realise only by experience. As we ascended, the mountain side descended sharply under our feet into the obscurity of the mist, and, looking upward, the sight of my companions, coated with the driving snow and cutting their steps with the ice axes, presented an appearance worthy of the Alps.

Being the last man on the rope, I had ample time to admire my industrious friends at work, only varied, occasionally, by a consignment of snow being transferred on to my

person from above. The view being so limited by the mist, I employed the delays by improving the steps already made by my predecessors, which, in fact, was somewhat necessary, for frequently the drifting snow had almost filled the cavities by the time I came to use them. The only watch possessed by the party stopped, presumably by the cold, but it must have been about two o'clock when our leader gallantly cut his way on to the top of the ridge and the slow task of step-cutting was over. The aneroid showed an altitude of 4000 feet, but something (probably about 200 feet) had to be allowed for changed weather conditions. We greatly regretted that the mist here prevented us from taking the photographs that we should have desired, for the surrounding views with the snow effects, could they have been seen, must have been superb. We spent a couple of plates at a partial temporary clearing, and one of them rewarded us, afterwards, with a fair representation of the scene.

Bearing now to the right we pressed on up the arête to the top, about 600 feet higher, and, as the snow was drifting here a good deal, we sank considerably at each step, making the going somewhat slow, but finally gained the summit, about three o'clock, as near as we could calculate, the aneroid registering 4600 feet, owing to the aforementioned cause. The views, of course, were non-existent under the circumstances, and photographs, except of ourselves and the Observatory Tower, were out of the question. It was with a sigh of regret that we thought of the cordial greeting, extended to all mountaineers by the late Observatory officials, that might have been ours had not that most regrettable event, the closing of the Observatory, taken place. The building itself lay beneath our feet, entirely submerged by the twelve feet or so of white covering. We could only sit down behind the tower, and, after I had thawed my moustache, which had frozen to the mountaineering hat, partake of what refreshment we had brought with us—minus the hot coffee, which "might have been."

The descent was made down the slope, following, as near as possible, the ordinary path route. Two thousand feet were descended before we emerged from the mist, when a fine

view, westward, was obtained of Loch Linnhe and Loch Eil, and we were able to take a few photographs with satisfactory results. Shortly afterwards the snow was left behind and the path rejoined a little below where it had been forsaken in the morning. Achintee was passed in due course, and at 7 p.m. we tramped into Fort William, wearing the air of conquerors and ready for a substantial meal.



THE OBSERVATORY TOWER, BEN NEVIS.