

ON THE RIDGES OF THE COOLINS.

BY WILLIAM BARCLAY, L.D.S.

THE bad weather of Skye is proverbial; is it not named the "Isle of Mist?" But it is not always so; there are days when the sun does shine on the Coolins, when the dark chasms surrounding Coruisk are lit up with the light of day, and the black and jagged peaks above, are exposed to view.

In the month of September last, Mr. A. E. McKenzie and the writer journeyed to the distant isle, and enjoyed for a whole week one of those bright periods so rarely met with in that region when the sun shone with summer vehemence, and the hills stood out sharp and clear, day after day; so that we enjoyed one of the rarest of mountaineering holidays, and were enabled for five successive days to wander over the peaks, and along the shattered ridges of this fine mountain range. Nowhere else have we seen such shapely peaks or such narrow and sensational ridges.

After twenty-four hours continuous travel we arrived at Sligachan one Saturday night, in the midst of a downpour—the one and only touch of wet that we had during our holiday. While this inn may be all very well for the tourist who comes to gaze on the Coolins with reverential awe, or perhaps pay a visit to Loch Coruisk, it is really of little practical use, as a centre, to the climber who wishes to explore the inmost recesses of this giant range. Situated as it is at the extreme northern end of the group, it is convenient only for the hills in that vicinity. We were extremely fortunate in securing quarters in lonely Glen Brittle, right at the base of the south-western giants, and within striking distance of all the principal carries.

It would have taken too big a slice out of our holiday to spend a day in crossing from Sligachan to Glen Brittle, so we proposed to do Sgurr nan Gillean *en route*. With that intention we stayed the night at the inn, and hoped for a good day on the morrow. When we got up in the morning Sgurr nan Gillean was invisible, the mist being down to the first pinnacle; still, the day was promising, and we hurried over breakfast, and were off by 9.10.

PINNACLES
OF SGURR
NAN
GILLEAN

From the inn we struck straight across the moorland, over the Allts Dearg Mor and Bheag for the Bhasteir corrie. By 10 o'clock the day had improved wonderfully, the Red Coolins opposite had shaken themselves free of the mist, and the pinnacles above us began to show face. When we reached the entrance to the big gorge running down from Coire a' Bhasteir, we looked about for a place to leave our baggage, and found a suitable corner in the lee of a big boulder. Only one rucksack, with camera and a few sandwiches, and the rope, were taken up the hill. It was 11.15 when we reached the base of the first pinnacle, and by this time the Bhasteir was quite free of mist, as was also the greater part of Sgurr nan Gillean. We wasted no time, but immediately set off, up the rocks in front of us, and soon had topped pinnacle number one (2500). The second was as easily surmounted, and from the top (2700) we could see that the mist was not far above us. The wind was also blowing a little stronger and considerably colder. While ascending the third pinnacle, (2900) we entered the mist, and soon after had to "button up," as we were feeling rather chilly. Our first difficulty was experienced at the "bad step"—the descent from the third to the base of the fourth pinnacle—and here the rope was put on. The route was easily found, however, by following the nail marks, and a good hitch enabled the second man to descend in safety. The fourth pinnacle (3000) was much steeper than any of the previous ones, and gave much better climbing, though no further difficulty was experienced, and it was with a feeling of something akin to pride that we stepped up to the summit

cairn (3167) at 2.30. The mist had now completely gone, and the whole range of the Coolins lay before us. On our left were the "Reds," their soft and rounded outlines forcibly reminding us of the Cairngorms; while Blaven and Clach Glas conducted us round to the great chain of the "Black" or true Coolins.

Away in the south, over the hollow of Coruisk, we recognised Gars-bheinn and the Dubhs, and from there could follow the main ridge right round, over Alasdair, Dearg with the "Inaccessible," Banachdich, Ghreadaidh, and Mhadaidh, to Bruach na Frithe and the Bhasteir just on our right.

Truly a noble and never-to-be forgotten sight to one who has never before seen this fine array. Beneath us, the great Lota Corrie could be followed round the prominence of Sgurr na h-Bamha into the equally great Harta Corrie. Though it was still pretty cold, we found a sheltered nook, and enjoyed a little lunch; then we followed the ridge running down to the west, till we came to the "Tooth"—although thus named on the map, it is almost invariably called the "Gendarme." This we successfully traversed, and then descended by a small chimney into the Coire a' Bhasteir. We now skirted the precipices of Sgurr nan Gillean, descending diagonally over the screes till we reached the upper end of the gorge. Then keeping along its eastern wall we soon reached our hidden belongings. After a short rest and some lunch by the burnside, we shouldered our heavy rucksacks and set out on the final stage of our journey. We were already at a fairly good elevation, so by simply rounding the slopes of Meall Odhar, in about half an hour we reached the summit (cairn) of the Bealach a' Mhaim. There was little sign of a track on the Glen Brittle side, but as the "going" was fairly good, we had no necessity for one. Before descending very far, however, we struck off to the right, as the walking was easier, and joined the Carbost—Glen Brittle road about a mile above the bridge. In the passing we had a splendid view into Coire na Creiche. Once on the road we settled down to a steady tramp, and reached our quarters a few minutes before eight o'clock, or in

one hour and fifty minutes from the gorge in Coire a Bhasteir.

It was dullish when we rose the following morning, and from our door we could see the mist playing about the summits of Alasdair and Sguman, alternately exposing and enveloping these SGURR NAN EAG rocky teeth. We did not settle any definite programme till we had seen how the day was to turn out, but after breakfast set off in a leisurely fashion for Coir a' Ghrunnda. In the passing we stopped for a few minutes to have a survey of Coire Labain, but the mist was still hovering about. Out to sea the mountains of Rum were also cloud-capped. It was eleven o'clock when we rounded the shoulder of the Sguman ridge and dropped into Coir a' Ghrunnda.

Here if anything the mist was a little denser, creeping along the hillsides at about the 2000 feet level, and as there was little prospect of its lifting now, we decided on a simple ascent of Sgurr nan Eag, reserving our energies for a better day. Descending to the stream, we struck up the opposite slope for about 1500 feet, and so got on to the southern aspect of the mountain. It was then a steep ascent over scree and broken rock, all the way to the summit (3036). This, a long, narrow ridge with a couple of eminences on its crest, slopes steeply to the north-east in great slabby rocks.

We wandered along to the southern extremity of the ridge, and lunched in a sheltered corner. The mist was still very thick, so in about half an hour's time we began the descent, endeavouring as far as possible to follow our line of ascent. When we emerged from the mist, however, we found ourselves a little farther to the east than we expected, the noise of the Allt Coir a' Ghrunnda being responsible for that, as we had no desire to land on the steep rocks of that corrie. We had a second lunch by the side of the burn, and then a daunder home in the evening.

It was a beautiful morning when we set off on Tuesday for Sgurr Dearg, not a cloud was in the sky, and all the tops were clear. The ridge of Dearg towered above our cottage, and as it was only a "INACCESSIBLE" short mile to its base, we very soon had left the grass behind and were breasting the stony slopes. Under a broiling sun we found these screes very trying, but it was not very long before we struck the ridge, and then, of course, it was much cooler. The walk along the ridge was most enjoyable, affording on the one hand most impressive views of Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh, and on the other of Sgurr Alasdair and Tearlach, separated by the deep notch which forms the beginning of the famous Stone Shoot.

We reached the small cairn at 11.30, took a few photographs, and then prepared to tackle the "Inaccessible" Pinnacle, which of course is the true summit of Sgurr Dearg, and which still towered above us for about sixty feet. We skirted the pinnacle round to the south, and relieving ourselves of our rucksacks, put on the rope and commenced the ascent.

The climb from this side, though three or four times the length of the short northern extremity, is considered to be much easier, but, as a matter of fact, we found it quite difficult and sensational enough for us, though I must admit, at the same time, that we enjoyed it thoroughly. The ascent occupied us altogether about an hour, but that was going in a very leisurely fashion. Five minutes was spent at the top (3255), and then we descended, the journey this time occupying forty-five minutes.

We now scrambled along the ridge southwards to the next—nameless—top, and from there took a photograph of the pinnacle. Then we returned to the cairn on Sgurr Dearg and lolled away another hour with lunch, photography, etc. It was such a grand day that altogether we spent over four hours on the top of this mountain, and neither of us considered any part of that time as wasted. It was only when we remembered that the month was September, and that the

afternoon was wearing on, that we thought of moving, so turning our faces northward we descended to the Dearg-Banachdich col. Then followed another most enjoyable ridge scramble over two or three minor tops, until we were brought face to face with the highest point of Banachdich (3167) in an hour and ten minutes from Sgurr Dearg. While coming up from the col we observed two figures on the skyline making their way along the ridge of Dearg, and as we sat by the cairn they showed themselves on the "Inaccessible," when we exchanged salutations.

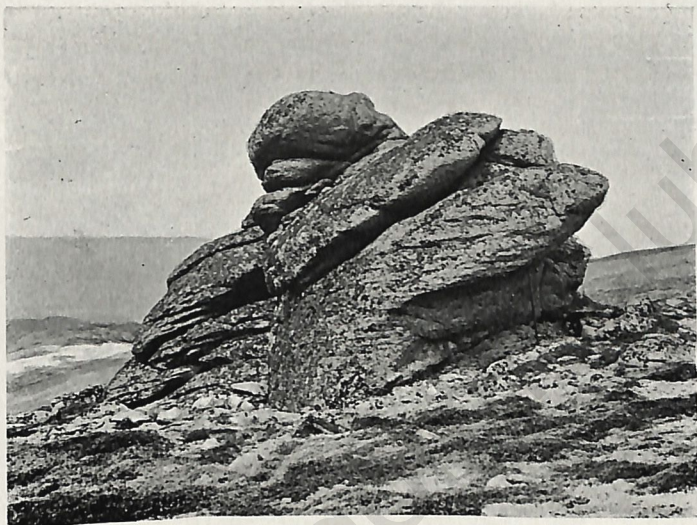
In our descent we followed the western ridge till about half way along to Sgurr nan Gobhar, then turned down the steep scree slopes into Coire na Banachdich, and found an easy though rough descent to lower levels. A quiet walk over the soft moorland landed us home at 5.50, just as fresh as when we left in the morning.

Wednesday morning showed a continuance of the good weather, and soon after nine we were wending our way for

	Coir a' Ghrunnda, this time with a definite
SGURR DUBH NA	programme in view, namely, to explore
DABHEINN,	that part of the ridge between Sgurr
SGURR DUBH	Dubh na Dabheinn and Sgurr Alasdair,
MHOR, SGURR	including, of course, the famous Alasdair-
TEARLACH,	Dubh "Gap." It was just 10.30 when
SGURR	we reached the entrance to Ghrunnda,
ALASDAIR	and keeping well to the left along the
AND SGURR	base of the Sguman cliffs, we rapidly
SGUMAN	made our way over screes and slabs to

the inner basin of the corrie. This is completely cut off from the lower by a mighty barrier of great sloping slabs, and is in fact a corrie within a corrie. In this upper part, amidst the most magnificent rock scenery, lies the little Loch Coir a' Ghrunnda, o'ershadowed by the peaks of Sguman, Alasdair and Dubh na Dabheinn. Looking backwards down the corrie one obtains splendid views of the islands of Rum, Eigg and Canna.

We rounded the lochan and attacked the slopes of Sgurr Dubh na Dabheinn, up whose sides we rapidly scrambled,



SGORAN DUBH—ARGYLL STONE.



Photos by SGORAN DUBH—CLACH A' CHUITSEICH. *S. A. Kay.*

at first over tremendous blocks of gabbro, and latterly over a broken up rock face. The ridge was struck just to the left of the prominent knob, Caisteal a Gharbh Choire, and from here the graceful Gars-bheinn looked most inviting. When we reached the top (3069) of Dubh na Dabheinn at 12.20, the short subsidiary ridge leading to Dubh Mhor looked so tempting that we thought we might as well take a run along to it. So dropping down the slight distance to the col we slipped off our rucksacks, and a short twenty minutes' climb over excellent rock landed us on the narrow moss-covered summit (3120). During the few minutes that we were sitting here a couple of eagles came sailing over our heads and disappeared towards Blaven, probably the same two that we had seen some time before circling about Alasdair. But it was now time to be moving, so we descended to the col, found our packs, crossed over the top of Dubh na Dabheinn again, and continued along the main ridge towards Alasdair. At the dip we halted half an hour for lunch, and immediately afterwards were pulled up short by a steep rock face in front. The rope was put on, but we found the pitch more sensational than difficult, and a few minutes more brought us to the well-known Alasdair-Dubh "Gap."

This is a deep cleft that completely cuts the ridge, and to all appearances seems to bar further progress. Steep unclimbable gullies descend on either side, on the one hand into Coir a' Ghrunnda and on the other to Coir an Lochain. We were well informed as to the ways and means of passing this obstacle, so without more ado we hitched the rope and slid into the cleft. The route—unmistakable by the nail-scraped rocks—now led up a narrow slit in the almost vertical wall opposite. Into this the leader jammed himself, and after a deal of scraping and wriggling reached firm anchorage above a jammed block. The second man followed after the rucksacks had been sent up, and a stiff pull up the next pitch landed us above the difficulty, the passage of which had occupied three quarters of an hour. It was now quite an easy scramble—though the rock was very rotten—up the remaining distance to the summit of Tearlach (3230).

From the hollow between this top and Alasdair there runs down into Coire Labain the great "Stone Shoot"—the "easy" ascent of Alasdair. It was only a short drop from the summit of Tearlach into this gap, and then a ten minutes' scramble landed us on the top of Sgurr Alasdair (3275)—the giant of the Coolins. Here we finished our sandwiches and prunes, and watched the evening mists begin to gather about the summits.

We were now faced with the problem of reaching easy ground before darkness fell, so we decided to cross Sgurr Sguman and descend into the south branch of Coire Labain. We found a fairly easy way down Alasdair by keeping a little below the connecting ridge on the south or Coir a' Ghrunnda side, then from the dip it was but a step to the top of Sguman (3104). Daylight was now fast waning, and if we intended to get out of Coire Labain before dark, we must be pretty smart about it. From the summit we kept southwards for a little, and then turning to the right we worked our way down the screes, dodging the rock pitches as they came, and ultimately reached easy ground just as daylight left us. The remaining mile over the moorland was accomplished without mishap, and home was reached at 7.35.

Thursday: After our big day of yesterday we intended taking it rather easy to-day, so decided on a simple ascent of Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh, which, however, was

SGURR A'
GHREADAIDH
AND SGURR
A' MHADAIDH

extended to the inclusion of the neighbouring peak of Sgurr a' Mhadaidh. We left at 8.35 and followed the road up Glen Brittle for about a mile to the Allt a' Coire Ghreadaidh, then joining this stream we kept it company through the fine grassy slopes into the corrie of the same name. In its upper part this corrie forks, one branch running up to the right towards Banachdich and the south top of Ghreadaidh, while the other leads directly up to Sgurr a' Mhadaidh; a ridge running down from the summit of Ghreadaidh forms the division. As the rocks in the right section did not look very inviting—being wet and slabby—we struck up to the left round the prominence, and so got on to the ridge leading up to Ghreadaidh. Then a

short climb, partly by gully and partly up broken rock, landed us on the north top (3190) of Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh. Another twenty minutes' scramble along a very narrow and shaky ridge, and we were at the south top (3180). And here, perched on one of the shapeliest peaks of the Coolins, we sat for long, studying the line of the ridges and watching the mist play about the peaks to the south of us, while the calm and lonely Coruisk was lying in the shadows away down below. It was a lovely day, and as it was our last we were loath to leave. When we did move we returned to the higher top, and then continued down the ridge northwards, passing the tremendous cleft An Dorus. This is simply another "Gap" similar to the one between Alasdair and the Dubhs, but it is easily skirted on the east, and another short descent of 130 feet brings one to the Bealach. From here it was only a ten minutes' scramble to the highest point of Sgurr a' Mhadaidh—South top (3020).

On this narrow summit we remained for an hour and had lunch, then we dropped down to the Bealach again, and descended by a stone shoot into the upper part of Coir a' Ghreadaidh. A leisurely walk down the glen brought us to the road in Glen Brittle in an hour and a quarter.

The following afternoon we walked over to Sligachan by the Bealach a' Mhaim, caught the post gig for Portree, and on Saturday bade adieu to the Isle of Skye.

And here in the depths of the city
My fancy is ever astray,
My heart's with the kings of the Highlands—
I see them, I hear what they say.

We can fully endorse Mr. Tough's remarks—C.C.J. Vol. I.—as to the necessity for wearing gloves, for unless one possess the hands of a navvy it is next to impossible to climb for more than a single day.