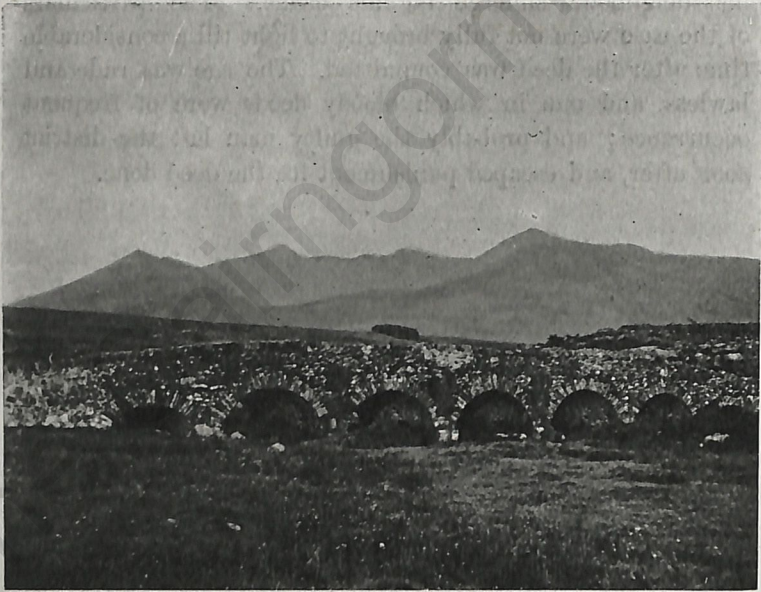


MACGILLICUDDY'S REEKS:
IN THE WET ON CARRAUNTOOHILL.

BY ERNEST A. BAKER.

THE right starting point for Carrauntoohill (3,414 ft.), the highest mountain in Ireland, is a homely little hotel at Glencar, eight Irish miles from the railway station at Lough Caragh, on the route to Valentia. We did not find this out



GLENCAR BRIDGE AND THE REEKS.

till we had made arrangements for setting out from Killarney, from which tout-ridden paradise we got away with all speed as soon as we found Glencar on the Ordnance map, having cancelled luncheon basket, jaunting car, and an early call. But a day had been lost, and we had to pay the forfeit of inexperience. From Bantry to Glengarriff and Kenmare and Killarney we had enjoyed weather of a halcyon serenity little

known in Kerry. Even the inquisitorial American had been induced now and then to turn an eye upon the scenery, and vary his interrogations as to the yield of oats per acre with reminiscences, not too insulting, of the grandeurs of his native Yellowstone. Driving up past the forest-fringed and mountain-girdled lake of Caragh and over the high moors to Glencar, we had the ineffable curves and soaring pinnacles of the Reeks ever above us, bathed in an atmosphere of pure, aerial tints that softened, but did not blur, their gracious contours. A mile or two from their lowest spurs is Glencar, with mountains, lakes and tarns on every side, and the two Caragh rivers, the larger one a noble salmon stream, flowing past the white-walled inn.

But the beatific splendours of the sunset harbingered an adverse change for us. Glencar reminds one of a hundred places in the Western Highlands of Scotland, reminds one with a difference not easy to define. The weather, at any rate, is not the point of contrast, for we set out for "the Reeks" next morning in a Scotch mist that might have been distilled on the skirts of Ben Nevis. Walking three miles beside the lesser Caragh, which runs down from the mountains through whole thickets of regal *Osmunda*, we sat us down beside its source, Lough Acoose, and spent an hour sadly hoping that the peaks would come forth again at length as radiantly as on yester evening. To-day was our last chance—to-morrow we were off home again.

Carrauntoohill stands at the head of a deep corrie, or mountain glen, Coomloughra, whose sides are two high ridges running far out from the midst of the Reeks to the peak of Caher on the south and the long crest of Beenkeragh over against it. Caher flings down a series of precipitous buttresses towards the three loughs, Eighter, Coomloughra and Eagher, which lie in this vast hollow—so we had ascertained with a field-glass last evening—and on certain of these rocks, we were told, excellent climbing was to be found by the enterprising. Long before we had crossed the last bog and stumped up the wet and slippery slopes to the foot of the crags we were soaked to the skin, and could with impunity challenge the weather to do its worst.

At 2,000 feet above the sea we struck along an ill-defined terrace on the face of Caher, whose shattered buttresses hung above and beneath us. Far down in the misty vacuity of the corrie we had glimpses ever and anon of the spray-swept waters of Coomloughra and its sister tarns, with the huge steepness of Beenkeragh glooming through the mist beyond. At moments we could see even the notched and jagged razor-edge that runs up and down from Carrauntoohill over Beenkeragh, and Skregmore, almost encircling, with Caher, the whole of this majestic amphitheatre.

Hard purple sandstone, not unlike in texture to the famous grits of Torridon, is the material of which these cliffs are made, but it is far less solid and firm, the buttresses running aslant up the mountain face, and exposing their edges to the action of the weather. These sharp and nearly vertical arêtes tower up into the mist like a series of slabs set one over another edgewise. We made for what seemed the steepest and most continuous, and on that account was probably made of firmer substance than the rest. Behind its lower slabs we sat down again before climbing, and waited still more hopelessly for any possible change; but another hour's persistent smoking had no effect upon the weather.

We got to work at last on our buttress, defiant of wind and rain, but sorely distressed by the drenched vegetation that smothered many of the ledges between the cleaner pitches. Gritty surfaces and a reasonable sufficiency of handholds behind the slabs took us upward at a fair pace. Even the vertical and overhanging rocks that rose in rapid steps on the front of the buttress proved amenable to cautious treatment. But after 200 feet of scrambling, the edge of the arête broadened out, steep as ever, driving us off into the western gully. So far, we had not used the rope, confiding in the soundness of the rock; but here a succession of slabby cliffs, with extremely few ledges and handholds, induced us to link ourselves together and make use of all our science. One of these short cliffs, with a fissure cut across its face, gave us a bad five minutes ere we struggled out upon its shattered top and shifted away a treacherous slab for the benefit of future scramblers.

The rocks here had decayed more rapidly, flaking away in large splinters, several of which went a thousand feet down the corrie when our movements dislodged them. So steep is this face that nearly all the debris shoots right away to the foot of the cliffs, and the gullies are remarkably free from scree when the ruinous state of the buttresses is considered. It is a most unusual thing for a face so steep to have so much vegetation between the rocks.

High on the left our buttress seemed to end in a massive turret, fixed on bad foundations and apparently tottering to its fall. We regained our route here, and, climbing behind the turret, saw that the buttress still ran on, in more and more of those crazy slabs, far up into the mists. We had climbed about 500 feet, when we reached the point where it tapers away into the mountain. There we looked over, as far as the mist permitted, into the bewildering maze of cliffs and ridges on the flank of Caher beyond. We were soon at the 3,000 ft. level, and a few minutes later the cairn loomed up before us. A serviceable shelter has been built into this structure, where we made another leisurely halt, with the same neutral effect on the weather. The aneroid gave our height as 3,100 feet, a hundred short of the registered altitude; but, to our surprise, as we continued our way east we came in a furlong or so to a cairnless peak, which gave the required figure of 3,200 feet. Unless the aneroid was seriously at fault, the cairn is not placed on Caher's true summit.

We had not broken through the clouds to the light of day, but had reached a thicker zone than ever. Nothing but the proverbial pea-soup similitude can give an idea of our atmosphere. But a blind man could find his way from Caher to Carrauntoohill, if his sense of touch preserved him from a headlong flight down the gulfs to right and left. The ridge is like that of Crib Goch, on the Gorphwysfa ascent to Snowdon, save that the dangerous cliffs are here on the north side, plunging down to Coomloughra, and only the precipitous slope on the other side. Often it would be a difficult feat to keep upon the actual ridge; one must perforce seek a safer footing lower down, especially if the wind blow as it

did that day. Eastward, and then more and more to the north, we made our way, pausing oftentimes to admire the superimpending crags of the great buttresses, or to look down through the mouths of black gullies into the churning vapours filling deep Coomloughra.

Where the ridge strikes Carrauntoohill it widens out, and the summit cone of the Reeks is on this side a grassy brae. Our halt on the peak we had taken so much trouble to ascend was a very brief one, for we had wasted time waiting for the mist to break, and now the afternoon was fleeting. We verified the barometer, which we felt must, with the compass, be the chief guide in our subsequent gropings, and looked round for our route homewards. Macgillicuddy's Reeks are something like an octopus, sending out huge knotty tentacles to the Gap of Dunloe towards Killarney, and to the west towards Glencar. The two long western limbs, by one of which, the Caher ridge, we had ascended, all but meet again at the far end of Coomloughra; and our object now was to descend by the other, the three-mile ridge of Beenkeragh and Skregmore. But still the curtains kept obstinately drawn all round us; nothing could be seen of any ridge abutting on Carrauntoohill except the one we had come up by. The mass of the mountain seems to be sheared away in precipices on all other sides. Next day we had the belated satisfaction of making out with a field-glass that there is a sudden break between Carrauntoohill and Beenkeragh. But now, although we suspected the existence of such a break, we utterly failed to locate it. For one thing, the Ordnance Survey in this district has not marked out the contour lines, and our map was not even shaded. Beenkeragh was simply put in a mile to the north-northwest, but the shape of the connecting link was for us to guess.

We launched out into the unknown, keeping the right direction as nearly as the steepness of the cliffs would allow, an abrupt ledge pushing us further and further east. Grievously weathered and disintegrated, this side of Carrauntoohill is covered with loose masses of wreckage, most of it ready to shoot away down hill on the slightest provocation. To avoid hitting each other with any of

these missiles unwarily dislodged, we kept as much abreast as we could, and when sheer cliffs breaking across the mountain forced us into a shattered, irregular gully, the lower man took cover whilst his mate slid cautiously from one precarious hold to the next. The gully soon gave birth to a streamlet, and developed into something more like a sporting climb, which, however, made the chances of hitting the ridge to Beenkeragh in that direction still more unlikely. Some 500 feet down, a gap opened in the steep buttress to our left. I traversed cautiously through, for there was a drop of unknown depth just underneath. All that could be made out beyond of the northern face of Carrauntoohill were long slopes of tremendous steepness, broken at every few yards by impracticable cliffs—of the wished-for ridge not a sign. Traversing across a precipitous face being one of the least welcome tasks a climber can set himself, we were not eager to venture that way; and now the path we had been following seemed to be cut off. A stone was pushed over into the mist. There was a pause before it struck the mountain, and then another, its final echoes as it fell into the distant screees sounding very far away indeed.

We clambered back along the slippery cliff top to the gully, which at this point cuts through a portion of the escarpment in a straight, steep pitch, with a waterfall. The pitch might be 40 feet or it might be 400 feet; we could not see down it for twenty, and the noise of the stream was confused with the clattering of many waters and the beating of the gale. Beside the gully, on the east, the cliffs went down in broad bands, with sloping ledges between, zig-zagging among which, in worm-like attitudes, we landed in about a hundred feet at the bottom of the pitch. Broken rocks led on to where, deep below, a stream was falling down the mountain side. In vain we tried to find out whether it ran east or west. But we had travelled so far from our proper direction that we had small hope of finding that it flowed down the western side of Beenkeragh.

We found ourselves in a deep cove, hemmed in by rocks, and sloping, so far as we could make out from the data at our disposal, toward the Hag's Glen, on quite the wrong side

of the mountain for us. We had, in fact, descended 1,200 feet from the summit, and would have been thankful to find ourselves back again. The alternative before us was to re-ascend to the 3,100 ft. level, and drop over the ridge into Coomloughra, or to continue downwards and circumambulate the whole northern portion of Macgillicuddy's Reeks. We decided to climb, but first to have some food. A paper of sandwiches had been thoughtfully reserved for emergencies. Unfortunately, they had not been well packed. The string had broken, and the sandwiches had been distributed into a sort of cushion underneath the camera and a bundle of photographic plates, which they had doubtless saved from many hard knocks. We emptied out the mixture of paper, nutriment, and various odds and ends, on to the hillside, and browsed at leisure. Then, striking up a gully at the head of the cove, we mounted again deeper and deeper into the mist. Our only fear was lest this route should prove impracticable; but after climbing out to avoid a steepish pitch, crossing an outcrop of easy rocks, and dragging ourselves wearily up one of those portentously steep grass slopes that are such a feature of the Reeks, we came out on the sky-line.

Then we turned west for Beenkeragh, whose distance was still entirely unknown to us. Caher's ridge had been like a high-pitched roof; Beenkeragh's resembled the top of a ruinous, dry-built wall. You could see through it where big blocks had tumbled out; many of those that remained on the summit rocked at a touch. There was no dropping below the crest here. We had to bestride it and worry up and down every tooth and indentation, wind, rain, mist and greasy rocks making the going exceedingly tiresome. Reaching the apex of a sharp pinnacle, we took stock of the situation. The summit, which was not in sight, and might be a mile away yet, was 214 feet higher than our present position, which was exactly 3,100 feet above sea-level by the aneroid. We knew only too well that there were two miles of this sort of work before us if we pushed on over Skregmore. It was late, and we reluctantly determined to give up the rest of the programme. At the first point where a descent appeared feasible without too much climbing, we left the

ridge, soon reaching a steep grass slope broken by crag, down which in the process of time, slipping, tumbling and sliding on the boggy herbage and loose scree, we reached the haven of Glen Coomloughra. For the first time since the morning we were actually below the mist. On three sides were the mountain walls, their lower slopes alone visible; on the other Lough Eagher outspread its lonely waters. We skirted its southern shores, sometimes wading past the foot of projecting bluffs; then crossing the moraine between the lakes we followed the north edge of Coomloughra and Eighter, to where the accumulated waters make a passage between the opposing horns of the two great ridges, and fling themselves in a far-seen cataract down to the lowlands.

This mountain portal commands a wide prospect of western Kerry. The vision that broke upon us was a clouded one, but therewithal the more solemn and more magnificently stern. A wild sunset was burning itself out in the west, still throwing into dark relief Brander on the far sea-shore, and the Slieve Mish Mountains, with Dingle Bay running far in among the hills, Lough Caragh and half a score of lakes and tarns dimly lighted by the fading splendour. Dusky woods, wan waters, and gloomy moorlands grew darker and darker as we looked at the smouldering sky, until all were swallowed up by new rain clouds from the black south-west.

With true Irish contrariness, just as we dropped at length into the valley, the mountains came out of the mist. Caher and Carrauntoohill and Beenkeragh, there they all were, feebly illumined by the last glimmer of twilight, but clear right up to the highest rock-tooth on their crest. Nor was this bitter piece of irony our only trial. Between us and the hotel was a tract of bog. In the morning we had found the path across with no difficulty; in the dark we went incontinently adrift. For half an hour we floundered blindly through rivulets and moss-hags, splashing ourselves up to the eyes with miry water in the ditches where peats had been cut. Our appearance was inglorious when we re-entered the hotel. "Had we done it?" they asked. - The gillies had declared that it was a sheer impossibility to find the way to Carrauntoohill in such weather. They did not know the mountaineer.