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SOME JOTTINGS FROM BEN NEVIS.

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TWENTY-FIVE holidays had we spent near the Cairngorms, sixteen of them in the summer, and nine of them in the spring, and during those holidays the central and western Cairngorms had become somewhat familiar. Nor had familiarity bred contempt, but rather affection grew as knowledge increased. Then the fates intervened, and this last summer our steps were turned in another direction; Fort William was our holiday place, with Ben Nevis as a substitute for the Cairngorms.

The West Highland Railway, by which we travelled, undoubtedly gives the finest run of scenery that can be had in a railway journey in these islands. The whole ride from the western outskirts of Glasgow to the terminus at Mallaig is full of interest, and has been dealt with fully, in places perhaps exuberantly, in the official hand-book "Mountain, Moor, and Loch," though this catalogue title curiously omits reference to the superb river scenery of the Spean. I content myself here with saying that one sees in a half-day's journey much more than one can adequately cope with or remember in detail. Even with the help of good maps, so closely do things of interest follow each other, and so rapid is the change of view, that the mind gets almost bewildered in the effort to keep pace.

Baddeley describes Fort William as "not in itself a pre-

possessing town," and I agree with him. The railway has occupied what might possibly have been made a respectable fore-shore, and has cut off the site of the old fort, where a really pretty public promenade ground could have been made. The railway station is cramped, and the pier bald and mean. The High Street runs parallel with the railway; it is not high, it is narrow, it has walkable pavement on one side only, and there is no outlook from it. Inland from it the ground rises rapidly, and there are parallel roads along the hill-side; but these roads are inconvenient of access, and as they are in common use as cattle tracks they are usually in an undesirable condition; parts of them command a good outlook over the sea-lochs and to the opposite hills, and in places seats are provided. The pleasant part of Fort William is its southern suburb, Achintore. Here the main road runs along the shore, the detached houses are on one side only and have a free outlook over the loch. Fort William is abundantly supplied with hotels, and their porters and touts figure notably among the population. It seems as though the little old-fashioned town had been taken by surprise; the organisations that cater for tourists have discovered its convenience of position as a place "to get out of," and it has not yet been able to adjust itself to its new conditions.

Of course the immediate local object of interest is Ben Nevis, but this is quite out of sight from the town. The Cow Hill, less than a thousand feet high, rises behind the town, separating the shore-lands from Glen Nevis, and quite blocking the view towards the Ben. The mountain owes its fame among ordinary tourists to the fact that it is the highest summit in the British Isles, and among climbing men to its possession of probably our most notable crags. The mountain mass lies east and south-east from Fort William. It stretches about four and a half miles from N.W. to S.E., and has a breadth of scarcely two miles. Its summit plateau is of quite small extent, perhaps not more than forty acres, and contrasts thus in a notable manner with the great plateau between Ben Muich Dhui and Cairngorm, and the still greater one linking Braeriach and Cairn Toul. On the south and west, the mountain drops steeply in ridgy slopes and partially

developed corries into Glen Nevis. On the north-east, it drops in sheer ragged precipices into the glen of the Allt a Mhuilinn. The south side, Glen Nevis, is the one visited by ordinary tourists, and it well repays a visit. The north face is that beloved of rope- and-ice-axe men. The north-west portion of the mass, the Meall an t-Suidhe, reaches a height of only 2322 feet, and is somewhat definitely cut off from the main mass by a considerable hollow, in which at an elevation of about 1800 feet lies the lochan of the same name. The Meall rather blocks all ordinary views of the Ben itself from the west and north-west, and makes it somewhat difficult to get an adequate idea of its height and mass. The only satisfactory view we had was from the railway near Corrour; as seen from this direction the mountain towers up nobly, but the great precipice is only partly visible. Probably the most satisfactory view would be obtained from moderately high ground behind Banavie and Corpach.

In offering some impressions of Ben Nevis, I make no pretence to being an unbiassed witness. The Cairngorms have so long and so completely satisfied my sense of what mountains should offer, and I have become so accustomed to their varied attractions, that I am probably somewhat prejudiced against a fresh claimant for regard. Having thus discounted my opinions as merely opinions and merely my own, I nevertheless venture on a few points of contrast. First in regard to size. Ben Nevis is just a separate mountain, higher it is true by a hundred feet than anything in the Cairngorms, but otherwise smaller, smaller in bulk, and notably smaller in plateau area. And these plateaus of the Cairngorms are surely among their greatest charms; there is a special delight in wandering freely over such tracts of gravel and growth, among the lochans, and along the streams, all much above the 3000 foot level. On Ben Nevis no such stravaiging is possible; the small area of the top plateau is a savage wilderness of rough big blocks, over and among which walking is difficult and almost disagreeable. Secondly in regard to water. Briefly, Ben Nevis lacks water. True there are numerous burns running down its outer slopes, and one on the south face shows a notable cataract. But there is

nothing comparable to the falls of the Dee or those of the Garbh Uisge; there are no lochs to match against Avon and Einich, or even Etchachan, or the numerous lochans perched high in the corries. The Lochan Meall an t-Suidhe is as dull as a Highland loch can be, and it is the Ben's only one. Thirdly, in regard to corries. Ben Nevis has few corries; indeed the Coire Leis at the head of the Allt a' Mhuilinn and the Coire na Ciste in the great crags practically make up its list; the former is quite a typical little corrie, the latter is ugly and dull, though surrounded by mighty crags. The many fine corries of the Cairngorms, from the Garbh Coire downwards, are among their most notable and attractive features, and I believe the Garbh Coire itself is unequalled in Scotland. Lastly in regard to included valleys. The Ben Nevis mass includes but one valley, that up which the pony path ascends past the Meall, though it is bounded by two very good ones. The Cairngorms include numerous valleys—the upper Avon, the Lui Beg, the Derry, the Einich; and some of the high-lying ones are specially interesting, such as the flat and open valley of the first mile of the Dee, and the quite notably typical plateau valley of the Garbh Uisge.

Ben Nevis unquestionably has its merits, especially for rope- and-ice-axe men and for meteorologists, but for the holiday mountain wanderer it seems to me to be lacking in the features that make our Cairngorms so attractive. On the other hand the mere tourist finds three things that recommend it. Firstly, it is very near a town; a half-hour's easy stroll, or in less time a public conveyance, takes him from his hotel to the base of the mountain. Secondly, all the way right to the summit there is now a perfectly clear and rather well-made road. This was made in connection with the Meteorological Observatory, and was absolutely necessary for the construction and working of that institution. Alas! the observatory is closed, only for a time let us hope, but the path remains and is upheld, and tourists swarm on it in their thousands every year. Thirdly, there is a hotel on the summit!

The August of 1907 will, I expect, long remain in the memory of holiday-makers as the worst for many years.

Fort William suffered more than most places; its excess of rainfall and its deficit of heat were, I believe, the greatest recorded in the country. Thus during that month we were house-bound often, and our open-air days were few. Only three of them were given to Ben Nevis, one to Allt a' Mhuilinn, one to Glen Nevis, and one to the Ben itself. I had hopes that in the course of a month's holiday I might get in at least a dozen visits to the Ben, and I intentionally began with a visit to the glen of the Allt a' Mhuilinn, because that offered the best introduction to the great north-east crags, the Ben's outstanding feature. It was a relief to get out of the cramped narrowness of the little town, cross the Nevis Bridge, and step out on the good main road. This I held to the Lochy Suspension Bridge and the Ben Nevis Distillery, where the Allt a' Mhuilinn joins the Lochy. Passing through the distillery yard and crossing the railway line behind it, I had at once that feeling of space and freedom that comes with the open hill-side. In a few minutes I received the first pleasant surprise of the day. On the moorland are some low tumps, moraine heaps of the "sithean" type. From one of these rose at my approach several birds that I recognised at a glance as hoodie crows. But one bird attracted attention because, instead of rising as the others had done, it dropped stealthily down the slope of the tump with wide-stretched steady wings. The sunlight caught its back, and I saw that it was a golden eagle. At once I put the field-glass on it, and watched it rise, circle round, join its mate, and float away towards Glen Nevis. A pair of golden eagles so early in the walk was an unexpected delight.

At an elevation of some seven hundred feet, the tributary valley proper of the Allt a' Mhuilinn, a sort of "hanging valley," enters the wider valley of the Lochy, and as I looked up from below I saw the tributary stream suddenly appear with a rush that seemed to promise something worth visiting. Turning my back to my departing eagles, I trudged up the sloppy hill-side. There had been much rain in the preceding days, the burns were full, and the brae ran with water. But when I reached the place where the Allt a' Mhuilinn comes over the lip of its valley, I was more than recompensed. For

about a furlong the stream foamed and dashed through gorges and over cataracts. It had worn out great potholes, and thundered into them in great spouts. Probably these potholes are the "mills" that gave the burn its name, and I am surprised that so picturesque a spot is so little known and visited. But it is not readily accessible, there is no set tourist path to it, the guide-books do not direct attention to it, and so only an occasional wanderer enjoys it. Having stayed near it as long a time as I could spare, I followed the valley upwards throughout its whole length. It is a typical upland valley, reminding me much of the valley of the Little Bennie, which it resembles in many ways, though it is longer and has a rather larger stream with more of waterfall and cataract. When I got well up into the valley, the view of the great crags of Ben Nevis opened up, and I walked all along their base, carrying in my hand the S.M.C. special map, and noting carefully as I went all the visible detail. For nearly a mile and a half these crags tower up to a height varying from 1000 to 1500 feet above a steep slope of some 250 feet, sheer, ragged, pinnaced, cut into by deep gullies, standing out in vast ridges and buttresses, sombre, menacing, with almost no relief of verdure, and with their stern dead darkness emphasised by the masses of snow lying in their deeper recesses. The sky was overcast, so that no sunshine threw them into relief, and in the dull light it was sometimes not easy to separate a nearer mass projected on to a remoter one. I felt that such crags, seen under such conditions, did not attract; they were without beauty, they were uncompromisingly grim, and the close view of the fatal Slingsby's Chimney, near the base of which I passed, perhaps helped to strengthen my feeling. Quite in keeping with the picture was the frequent sight of eagles soaring over the Castle Ridge, over the lip of the Coire na Ciste, and over the great North-East Buttress.

At the extreme head of the glen, the final corrie curves round the North-East Buttress, below the sharp ridge that connects the Carn Deargs with the Ben. When I reached this little corrie, some hundred feet above its tiny lochan, I found a very comfortable couch among the fallen rocks, and

lay at rest to lunch, gazing upward at the great Buttress, about which three eagles floated, their melancholy sub-musical yelping call being quite audible. Had the day remained clear, I should probably have gone to the ridge, but, as mist began to gather heavily, I limited myself to visiting the base of the crag, and seeing where the underlying granite merged into the overlying porphyritic lava. Suddenly a pall of mist dropped right down over all the corrie and glen, and as I could see but a few yards I turned to descend. As I was carefully stepping down the steep, rough, loose screes, I saw a curious looking object lying among the rocks. "Meat-can? No; meat-cans don't have handles. Oil-can? No; thank goodness, people don't bring petrol cans up here." Then, a few more steps having brought me nearer, I uttered a shout of joy,—*"Hurrah, a rain gauge!"* and I turned to look up into the mist, behind which towered the great crag over which that rain gauge had been blown from the Observatory. The gauge is quite different from the normal pattern; indeed, one of my meteorological friends on first seeing it exclaimed, with cutting severity, *"Hullo! did you make that yourself?"* It is nine and a half inches high and five inches in diameter; it is made of galvanised sheet iron, with brass rim and iron wire handle; the cone was soldered half-way down, and has a small opening in its edge through which the collected rain-water could be poured out. Some fragments of thin wire attached to the loop of the handle suggest that it was anchored probably to a piece of rock. It was not very much battered by its fall, nor is it badly rusted. In the published Log of the Observatory there is the record that rain-gauges were blown away on the 8th and 11th of January, 1885, and that on the 15th gauges of a new pattern were introduced. Mr. R. T. Omond, the former Superintendent of the Observatory, writes me, "Several gauges were blown over the cliff to the northward while the B. N. Observatory was in use. The one you describe, was, I think, one of the earlier patterns that we tried. I remember we found some too light, and liable to be knocked over in strong winds, and the later patterns were made with the base weighted with lead. The ordinary gauge, which has a moveable rim fitting into

a fixed base, was quite unworkable on Ben Nevis; it got frozen fast on most days. So we had to devise gauges that could be carried in and out bodily, and the one you found is probably, as I said, an early experimental form."

Well, I strapped my find to my knapsack, and bore it triumphantly away. Then there remained the return journey through and under the pall of mist, which hid varying amounts of the crags, but made an effective revelation of the cultivated strath in the distance. I spent some more time at the "Mill," and then dropped down to the main road, well content with my first introduction to the Ben, and with the prize I had found.

The second expedition, several days later, was to Glen Nevis. This glen is of first class quality; no Cairngorm glen equals it, though Glen Feshie resembles it, and Glen Avon is wilder. Baddeley's account of its upper section is very confused; apparently he paid it but a single hurried visit. The glen has advantages and disadvantages. It is a recognised "thing to do," and Fort William has constructed and maintains a driving road for miles up it, a road of astonishingly good quality, on which a coach runs daily during the tourist season; this makes a visit extremely easy, but at the same time takes away some of the wildness appropriate to a Highland glen. The glen is inhabited, and in part under cultivation, so that houses and cattle are met with, and sheep are numerous; these cannot be said to increase the attractions of the wilderness except to the class of tourist that welcomes the sign "Refreshments" wherever he goes.

We left Fort William on our cycles in the forenoon of a promising day, a day that quite redeemed its promise by becoming brilliantly fine till late in the afternoon, and not breaking down into rain till after our return. The glen road turns off the main road at the south end of Nevis Bridge, and the entrance to the Glen, made to look pretty in photographs, is somewhat marred by the untidiness that seems almost inseparable from Highland cottages. But in a few minutes the varied beauties of the glen are evident: the pleasant woods that border the path, the river rushing through its

“Roaring Mill” or rippling over its shallows, the broad sweep of grassy hill-side, the more remote steeps of the Cow Hill, and the rugged torrent-scarred sides of Meall an t-Suidhe and the Ben. Near Nevis House the road degenerates into the customary unpleasantness of a farm road, but speedily recovers; the hill-sides steepen, we look up to the now immovable Rocking-Stone and the Vitriified Fort, and ahead to the bend of the glen at Achriach. Here three tributary glens converge, and the separating mountains are finely scarped at their summits, the western one showing red granite, and the eastern ones grey quartzite. The hills are grassed almost to their tops, and dotted with sheep, and trees are numerous, especially near the burns. At Achriach, acting on misleading information, we left our cycles; we should with advantage have ridden them more than a mile further. The new section of the glen is finer than the lower; the falls at Achriach are very striking, all appearance of cultivation is left behind, the steeps on either hand close in, and ahead the glen seems blocked by the converging hill-sides. On our left there rushed down from the south face of Ben Nevis a cataract probably nearly a thousand feet in fall, making in the bright sunshine an extremely pleasant picture. A little beyond this the driving road ends, and most visitors get no further; their terminus is marked by some of the usual debris of a favourite picnicking place. But the bit of the glen immediately beyond seemed to us the best, partly because it is wilder and less frequented. We are not yet at the true head of the glen, but the valley contracts to a mere gorge, through which the Nevis rushes in the most delightfully vigorous manner. Beyond the gorge, up stream, is a broad expanse of flat meadow-land, the site of an ancient lake, and over the precipitous brae at the head of this meadow leaps the Allt Coire a’ Mhoil in a splendid waterfall of some 250 feet. From the terminus of the driving road two foot-tracks lead forward, one right through the gorge, and the other higher on the brae, so as to take just the top of the gorge. We had been told that the lower track was in a dangerous condition, and so took the upper one, which proved to be a very interesting, rough, narrow

track, winding up the hill-side, crossing numerous burns, and opening up a widening view, especially into the depths of the gorge. Here we had increasingly good sight of the many superb examples of glaciated rock-surfaces with which the glen abounds. At the highest point of the path we came suddenly in view of the green meadow and the flashing waterfall. Here we rested awhile before turning back. On our return journey to the driving road we paid much attention to the wonderfully contorted condition of the rocks, which hereabouts are mainly schistose. The mountain sides showed the flexures on the grandest scale, nearly every weathered boulder showed minor crumplings, and from the beds of the burns we gathered many excellent pocket specimens. One, however, an extremely fine one, weighed over eight pounds, and it required something of an effort to decide on its annexation. However, it was carried off, and now reposes with other such mementos of geologic history and our pleasant wanderings, its cut and polished surfaces having a decorative value. By this time several vehicles had brought parties of visitors up the glen, and picnics were in full force; sauntering in the sunny afternoon down to our cycles, we had then the pleasant and easy ride down the glen and back to our quarters, with the entirely satisfactory feeling that we had seen one of the finest glens that Scotland can show, and that the weather had been on its best behaviour.

The almost continual bad weather had put the ascent of the Ben out of question, as there seemed no use in merely going up unless something were to be seen. Within two days of the close of our stay, therefore, I decided to go part of the way, even though I should not go far. So after sitting for more than an hour after breakfast watching the rain showers round about, I slung on my walking kit, and started for the Lochan Meall an t-Suidhe, leaving further proceedings to be determined later. The Ben Nevis road turns along the stream at the north end of the Nevis Bridge, and is a good driving road for a mile to the farm of Achintee. Here begins the pony path constructed in connection with the Observatory. And it must be said that the planning

of this road by Mr. C. Livingstone and its making by Mr. MacLean merit the highest praise. I think no improvement could be made on the line chosen, and its surface is as good as the conditions permit. Of course it varies greatly; in places, especially in its lower reach, it is smooth enough to cycle on; in parts it is actually paved with large blocks; well-constructed bridges lead it across the burns; but mostly it is made of smallish loose stones, like somewhat rounded road metal, rough under foot, and taking toll of not a few boot soles and heels from tourists that venture insufficiently shod. But throughout its whole length from Achintee right up to the Observatory, it is a perfectly clearly defined roadway, six feet wide, admitting absolutely no doubt as to the route, and, indeed, in its upper half, being the only part of the mountain on which walking in the ordinary sense of the word is at all possible. Of course the existence of this path immensely lessens the difficulty of the ascent, as there is no call for the functions of a path-finder; but at the same time it imposes a feeling of constraint: one is, as it were, thirled to a road, and debarred from stravaiging, though a glance around is enough to show that on Ben Nevis the greatest delight of a hill, that same stravaiging, is quite impossible, so intolerably rough is the loose, sterile, rocky surface.

Well, I jogged steadily up the path as it wound from Achintee round the Meall to the level of the Lochan, neither hasting nor slacking, passing two other visitors, and seeing in front heavy rain showers filling all the bend of the glen. Just above the loch is the Halfway House, a little wooden shanty for the use of the roadman. Here one ought to pay a shilling for the use of the road, but as no one sat at the receipt of custom I could not pay there, and had to satisfy my conscience at the summit. Looking back over the road I saw that I was the first of a procession of more than a dozen climbers.

So far the weather had been good, for the rain showers had sheered off westwards. Now began the rougher part of the walk, along the zig-zags whereby the path climbs the great west slope of the Ben. These zig-zags are readily seen

from neighbouring high ground, and I had previously taken careful note of them in fair blinks so as to know exactly how they lay. I had not gone far when the wind began to blow strongly and coldly, rain splashed loosely around, and a little higher the rain was mingled with scattered snow. But the mist, "sullen mist" as Keats well called it, was fairly high above me, the view opening around was interesting, and I went on. I was not incommoded by mist till I reached a height nearly 3000 feet, and even then, finding the mist rather dry, I judged it worth while to go yet higher on the chance that it might clear. Near the top zig-zag, I got a strong whiff of the odour of red-deer, but could see nothing of any. In due time I reached the lower plateau nearly 4000 feet up. Here I found two people, man and boy, walking somewhat leisurely. They proved to be Mr. Miller, the summit hotel proprietor, and his son, and they shared my opinion that the mist might clear. Up here the wind was indeed very cold, and I quitted the path, found a sheltering rock, and lay behind it to lunch. Then I finished the ascent, still in mist, through which gradually loomed the Hotel, the Cairn, and the Observatory. I asked that a cup of tea should be prepared for me at the Hotel [fancy such a luxury on the Cairngorms!] while I went to see the Observatory buildings at close quarters. Just as I finished my tea I felt the light suddenly increase. Stepping quickly into the open, and rejoining the Millers, I looked expectantly up the wind, and in a few minutes the mist broke, and all the southern view became clear. I had with me Mr. James Shearer's drawing of the view, and at once began to work through it. In a few minutes more the whole circle of view was absolutely clear, and remained so for more than an hour. I worked hard at my "Shearer," and had the great satisfaction of seeing in the actual view everything that is there represented in so thorough and minutely accurate a manner. I propose here to mention but two points in the view, for the panorama has often been described. Looking to the north-east I was much struck with some colour contrasts; the rock of the summit of the Ben itself is, as I have already said, of dull black-grey; across the glen

of the Allt a' Mhuilinn were the granite screes of the Carn Dearg ridge, looking as though they had been combed and brushed into smoothness, and glowing red in the sunlight; over them appeared sharply cut peaks topped with gleaming white quartzite. To escape from the bitter wind I took refuge in the lee of the Observatory tower; stepping round it, I was looking at my feet, lest I should trip over the struts; when I lifted my eyes to the north-east distance, my gaze was at once arrested by a bright bank of silver on the horizon,—the Cairngorms all in snow, the only mass of fresh snow in sight. The next day the *Scotsman* reported that the Cairngorms had been snow-covered down to 2000 feet. Ben Nevis itself bore no old snow on the plateau, but there were thousands of little flecks of fresh snow lying in the shelter of the stones, the remnants of a thin coating that had fallen early in the morning; of course every big gully bore its perennial wreath.

Having finished my "Shearer," I raced off to the east end of the great crag edge, and worked my way all along it, S.M.C. map in hand, peering down every gully, creeping cautiously out on the rocky projections, and having a most interesting and awesome series of views of the crags that I had previously gazed up at from below. I was much struck with the treacherous nature of the heads of the gullies. The rock had weathered down into a slippery, yellow clay, and this easily yielded to foot-pressure, and began to slide into the gully. Small avalanches were most readily started in this manner, and I heard stones clattering down gullies long after I had quitted them.

Just as I turned from the Observatory, a Snow-Bunting flew past me, uttering its pretty tinkling cry, and shortly after I heard a hoarse croak some furlong to the west of me and had a momentary glimpse of a large black bird, presumably a raven. I heard also what I took to be the bark of a fox in the corrie below. Turning to take a farewell look at the top plateau before beginning my descent, I saw a pair of eagles floating round the North-East buttress.

Then I descended to lower levels, partly following the line of cairns and posts that act as guides in snowy weather when

the path is hidden. In company with another visitor I made a leisurely descent, and we just reached the neighbourhood of Nevis Bridge when rain began. The evening was very wet, and I thought with commiseration of the score of people who still had to find their way down from the Ben.

THE HEATHER MOOR.

Come from the heart of the city
 To the Highland glens away,
 Where the heather sweeps like a purple sea
 O'er the splendid moors to-day.
 Climb up the steep of the winding lane,
 Leaving the world behind,
 Where the thyme smells sweet 'neath your passing feet,
 And there's dew on the edge of the wind.

Come from the grey of the city
 Up thro' the woodlands cool,
 By the pathway 'neath the pine trees
 To the lonely mountain pool.
 Where the rushes are waving greenly,
 And the curlew calls all day,
 And the hill-side sheep where the shadows are deep
 Go softly like ghosts of grey.

Come from the heart of the city
 Nearer the heart of God,
 Where the wind with its heav'n-brought message
 Comes o'er the cool green sod.
 Come to the heath'ry moorland,
 Blot out the past, and hope,
 Life leaps anew 'neath the heav'n of blue
 Over the purple slope.

—Augusta Hancock, in *The Gentlewoman*.