

A LONELY WANDER :
TAYNUILT TO GLEN DESSARRY.

BY WILLIAM BARCLAY.

“Oh ! for a breath o’ the moorlands
A whiff o’ the caller air ;
For the smell o’ the flowering heather
My very heart is sair.

“CHEERFUL as in a city, can we tread the houseless moor”—but on the present occasion it was from necessity and not from choice, that I did it alone. All arrangements had been made, accommodation secured even in the most out-of-the-way spots, and everything seemed propitious, when at the last moment Mac found himself unable to come. I travelled north by the “Midland,” and arrived in Edinburgh in the early morning, then went on to Perth, where I had a few minutes to spare before changing for Crieff. How beautiful and how fresh the country looked, and with what delight did I gaze on the old familiar landscapes—by Crieff and Comrie and St. Fillans to Loch Earn, up the narrow Glen Ogle to the corner where we get the surprise view of Loch Tay before rushing down by Luib and Loch Dochart to Crianlarich. The scene is now wilder as we steam onwards past Tyndrum and Glen Lochy to Dalmally and Loch Awe—Glorious Loch Awe ! soon, too soon, did we leave thee, and sweeping through the pass, draw up at our destination, Taynuilt.

Now that all the preliminaries had been disposed of, I started my holiday in earnest. It was about two o’clock, and as I had to reach a certain cottage in Glen Etive before nightfall, I made my way towards Bonawe ferry, the intention being to follow the track up the west side of Loch Etive. A few minutes after leaving the station I had a glimpse of the big hills—Ben Starav and Beinn Trilleachan—near the head of the loch, the bald yellow head of the latter seemingly rising to a greater elevation than that of the giant. The ferry crossed, I passed through

the quarry workings and their collection of workmen's houses, beyond which the road dwindled to a foot-path; and thus within half-an-hour of leaving the train I was alone in the wilds. "'Tis a vast glen," as Christopher North says, though no one can fully appreciate the deep meaning of these words till he has walked the glen from end to end, following the windings of the great sea loch by promontory and bay, in the lower reaches, and exploring the inmost corries of the great side glens that run up into the mists, in the upper. Houses there are few, now as then, road there is none till we reach the head of the loch; but here the similitude ends, for anyone now-a-days can "do" Glen Etive by steamer and coach in a one-day excursion, and from that, think they know the glen!

What an impressive sight is the head of the glen! I know many glen-heads, but none to equal this. On the right we have the noble mass of Ben Starav sloping down to the loch in graceful curves, and to the left Beinn Trilleachan rises steeply from the water; between these, but in the distance, appear the twin sugar loaves, the Buchailles of Etive, while the foreground is occupied by the great stretch of placid loch, with hills and glens and sky inverted in its depths. It was such a perfect day, and everything was so different from my usual surroundings, that in the enjoyment of it all, I simply dawdled the time; so much so, that before I reached the loch-head, the hills on the west were casting long black shadows. For the last two or three miles, in fact all along the base of Beinn Trilleachan, the track runs through a plantation of young trees, oaks and birches, and among these I gaily picked my way, reaching the loch-head at seven o'clock, then the Post Office, and in another two or three miles I arrived at my destination.

Next morning I had not even to lift my head from the pillow to know I was looking up the glen, for there were the Buchailles, its sentinels, already playing with the morning sunlight, while a few wisps of mist still gambolled along their steeply sloping sides. Ben Starav had impressed me so much on my way up the loch-

side, that I determined to give it my first attention. A bridge crosses the river just a little way below the schoolhouse, and a footpath led me over the moorland towards the gorge which the structure spans. The river was very low, but I could just imagine the scene in a flood. I followed the road that runs down to the keeper's house at Kinlochetive, leaving it, however, when I reached the Allt Mheuran and striking for the base of the northern shoulder of Ben Starav. This is a long, gradual ridge running right up to the summit, and forms the bounding western edge of the great north-eastern corrie of the mountain. When I had surmounted the first little shoulder I sat down to rest and admire my surroundings; it was too good a day to hurry—besides, why should I, had I not the whole length of it before me? As I sat I could see the people wending their way in twos and threes from up the glen and from down the glen towards the schoolhouse; for it is only every third Sunday that they have an opportunity of attending Divine service.

The ridge I was ascending contracted to a narrow neck between the two—north-eastern and western—corries, then it turned in an easterly direction rounding the tops of many narrow chimneys leading up from this N.-E. corrie. Just after this I reached the base of the final slope, and the prospect to the south now burst upon me. The prominent feature in this direction was the range of Ben Cruachan, which seemed to shut out everything else, though the whole length of Loch Etive, from the base of the mountain on which I stood right down to the narrows at Bonawe was also visible. While dodging about on the summit, I unearthed from the centre of the cairn a small bottle with the cards of two prominent members of the S. M. C. who had ascended the mountain from Inveroran, fourteen years ago; I added my own and replaced it.

Seen from a distance there are three prominences on the summit of Ben Starav, the highest, that which carries the cairn, being at the western end of the ridge; another, much about the same level though I daresay a few feet lower, is also situated at the corrie's edge but about a quarter of a

mile to the east of the first: while the other, Stob Coire Dheirg, at the extreme north-eastern end of the corrie, and at much the same elevation, surmounts a huge rocky buttress, which on the N.E. face is split into many long narrow chimneys, plunging down in appalling steepness to the corrie below. I went over both these points, in fact simply rounded the lip of the corrie, and then dropped down to the *col* and went up the short grassy slope to first a minor top and then the actual summit of Glas Bheinn Mhor (3258). This is a rather shapely hill, rising a regular cone at the head of the glen between Ben Starav and Stob Coir an Albannich. It seemed to be grassy on all sides, though on that to the west, which I descended, it was very steep and at some parts rocky. I squandered a good two hours here watching deer, and what not, then, as time was getting on, I descended directly to the Allt Mheuran, crossed it, and followed the right bank down to the road in Glen Etive.

On Monday I started up the glen, Bidean nam Bian, *the* summit of Argyllshire, being my objective, but first I was to cross Beinn Fhada, a dependency of the giant. Walking on to near Dalness, (to be precise, till I came to the Allt Fhaolain), I made straight for the steep slope in front of me, and slowly ascended by the right bank of the prominent waterfall that plunges down the hillside here. It was another hot day, and this was a very steep slope, so I got up rather slowly. I then turned sharply to the left and continued up the long gradual slope, and so on to the summit of Beinn Fhada (3497). A dense haze, which I took to be heat, had been gradually enveloping the distant hills for an hour or two, but when I reached the top and could look to the west, I found I had been mistaken and that a storm was approaching from the Atlantic. Also the temperature was falling, and I decided to descend direct to the Allt Fhaolain. On my way up I had noticed a faint track running along this glen, and thought it might be of use to me now. The whole hillside here was broken up into long ridges of jutting rock with narrow gullies and scree slopes between, and I soon found to my cost that I had not

chosen a very easy way down. The storm was also upon me, rain coming down pretty sharply, so I proceeded very carefully, worming my way through narrow chimneys or glissading down rattling scree slopes, at times disturbing a few deer, that, like myself, were seeking the valley. All along the bottom of these rocks, among the large blocks that formed the debris by the riverside, I noticed that the beautiful Parsley fern was exceedingly abundant. The glen now presented a very dismal appearance in contrast to the bright sunshine of a few hours ago: a general gloom seemed to envelop everything, being more pronounced of course in a deep and narrow valley. The rain had also settled into a persistent downpour, and, as a consequence, many little streams that had been dry for a month or more were once again brought into existence, playfully chasing each other down the steep hillsides. When I did reach the track I found it of little use, as it mostly ran through bogs, and now all these were sodden, so I had just to make my own "track." It seemed as if we were in for a bad night, for the mist was down to our very door and the rain was as thick as ever.

Tuesday was passed in the glen, loafing about, taking photographs and strolling up some of the little side glens.

I felt rather sorry next morning when I had to leave Glen Etive, for one could spend a week there, but I had no choice, being due in Glen Dessarry the following day. Since my arrival each morning seemed to outshine another in brilliance and to-day appeared to be the culminating point, for as I strode down the glen I seemed to think that never in all my life had I experienced such a breathlessly hot morning. I left the road just after passing Glenetive House, and crossed the moorland into the glen of the Allt a' Bhiarian, thus cutting off a corner. Then I got on to the track running up the left bank of the stream, and followed it westwards—a difficult job at times—till it vanished in the boggy moor. After that I just wandered on till I struck the little Lochan na Fola. There was no need for me to trouble about finding the beginnings of the track again as the moorland "going" was good, so I just

kept on towards a small glen that I knew would lead me down to Glen Creran. I got into the little pass below Beinn Fhionnlaidh and followed its babbling brook, till in about half an hour I found it opened into the larger Glen Ure. I could now see the red line of the path winding up the farther side but separated from me by a deep gorge, so I just kept on, and dropped into Glen Creran a little above Glenure farmhouse. The river was impassable here, so I wandered along its banks, upstream, for about a mile, till I was able to cross dryshod, and so get on to the road. Glen Creran I found was a very pretty glen, quiet, well-wooded in its lower and middle portions, and in its green pastoral upper reaches seemingly shut off from the world: this last no doubt being accounted for by the fact of its not being a thoroughfare. In about a mile I passed Salachail, the uppermost house in the glen, beyond which the road does not go. But the track for Ballachulish starts here and climbs directly up the hillside to a height of about a thousand feet, then it meanders over the breezy moorland for a couple of miles to the base of Beinn a' Bheithir, where it suddenly drops into Gleann an Fhiodh, and in another two miles opens on to the main road at Ballachulish. Some damming operations had been going on at a little lochan about mid-way, and this no doubt accounted for the well-marked nature of the track. I had a fine view of the top of Bidean nam Bian just before reaching the summit cairn; then I arrived under the steep stony slopes of the red mountain, Sgorr Dhearg, and had there not been a dip of nearly a thousand feet between us I should have been tempted to pay the summit a visit. As it was my path now zigzagged down to the valley, dropping 500 feet in a very short distance, and then, running round the slopes of Sgorr Dhearg led me into the little slate village of Laroeh. I had not been in the neighbourhood for ten years, and what was then a thriving hotel I now found converted into a fever hospital, so I had reluctantly to retrace my steps. In the evening I got out on the lawn in front of the house and secured a few photographs of a most gorgeous sunset. The sky had been absolutely cloudless the whole

day, but now clouds seemed to gather from all directions.

Next morning I left by the 7-40 steamer for Fort William; but what a change in the weather! the mist lay right round the hillsides to within a couple of hundred feet of the sea. The quickest and most direct way of reaching Loch Arkaig-head or Glen Dessarry from Fort William is to take train to Glenfinnan station, and then cross by the pass (1586) between Sgor Choilean and Streap, and so go down by Glen a' Chaoruinn to Strathan. That was my programme for the day. There was no improvement in the weather when we steamed westward by Corpach and along the length of Loch Eil, till after casting a glimpse down Loch Shiel we drew up at Glenfinnan, where I alighted. A well-marked path runs up the glen to Corryhully, which was pointed out to me by a friendly notice board, proclaiming at the same time the ground to be deer forest and private, with of course the usual "Trespassers will be prosecuted," so I entered the gate and followed the path up the riverside. This ended about half a mile beyond the cottage, but another then started climbing, with many windings, the side of Sgor nan Coireachan. That was then no use, so after noting it on my map, I kept straight on for the narrow V-shaped pass in front. The mist was hovering about the summit, but at times I could see sky beyond. At places there was a faint indication of a track, but at the top it completely disappeared, and as the ground fell steeply beyond into Glen a' Chaoruinn I had hopes of picking it up again; but no, there was no indication, and as the descent was mostly over boggy ground I did not much mind. About half way down the glen I crossed to the right bank of the stream to avoid some hillocks, and soon after this came within sight of the Glen Pean track, and made for that, knowing I was not far from Strathan. In about five minutes more I came upon a crowd of men clipping sheep, and was met by a headlong rush of about twenty dogs, each one of which seemed at first ready to swallow me.

My surmise of the previous evening proved correct, for the morning of Friday broke nice and clear, and it turned

out to be one of the hottest days of the month. The shepherds were off about 4 o'clock to scour the hills and hollows in search of stragglers, a most trying occupation for both men and dogs alike. I was in no hurry to start, but about 10 o'clock set off up Glen Dessarry. The road ends about a quarter of a mile beyond the house, but a footpath runs on to the next one—Upper Glen Dessarry—and then gradually dwindles away. Just after I had crossed Allt Coire nan Uth, I struck up the slope of Sgurr nan Coireachan, and so on to the summit (3125). I found two tops (north and south) about a quarter of a mile apart, and much about the same height, though I believe the northern is the higher. From this latter I had a splendid view. Sgor na Ciche looked a fine mountain with its twin peaks, and a little farther north Lurven played hide and seek among the mist. Loch Quoich was at my feet; I could look right down Glen Kingie till the eye rested on Loch Garry. To the west, through many narrow glens, one was led on to the Atlantic, on the bosom of which the Isle of Rum with its conical Sgurr nan Gillean, rose, one might say, almost aggressively, farther round, Skye was toned down by distance, but every peak of the Coolins could be recognised. Sweeping round towards the south, the eye was arrested by the huge bluff of Ben Nevis streaked with great patches of white, and farther round still was a regular sea of mountains with wave behind wave. From the summit I made the complete circuit of the corrie to Druim a' Chuirn (2980), descending direct to Glen Dessarry.

Saturday—the finish of my tramp—was to be a hard day, as I had to cover the 24 miles to Spean Bridge before 4 o'clock—the last train for the south leaving then. It was a good morning, and I got away by 7.30. There is an excellent road down to the pier at the loch-head. Beyond this, however, what is shown on the map as a secondary road, I found in reality was a very rough and nearly obliterated track which wound along the lochside, carefully rounding the bays and cutting off the promontories, mounting this hillock or bending round that, but all the while nothing more than the faintest scratch on the rough

hillside. Just before reaching Cuinich, the second house on the loch side, where I had some refreshing milk, I stepped on the upper limit of the road, and from there onwards, the surface was fairly good, except when the route ran through the shingle at the lochside, and then it certainly was rather trying. There was not another house now for five miles, so I kept up a steady pace, except when stopping to admire the scenery or take a photograph. There are some exceedingly pretty bays, but I could not stop to admire them, much as I should have liked. From Cuinich the road for a good many miles ran through woods, the cool of whose shade was very grateful. The next house passed was in ruins, but about a mile farther on I came to a keeper's cottage. It was after one o'clock when I reached the end of the loch, and found there was not time to go round by the Black Mile, so, notwithstanding the notice "Private," I took Lochiel's road past Achnacarry House, thus cutting off a couple of miles, though I did it reluctantly, as I believe the Mile Dorcha is very fine. I was now on the main road for Banavie, but soon left it to cross the canal at the locks, and then climb up hill again past the Mucomer Falls and the U.F. Church on its most commanding though it must be admitted bleak, position. While waiting on my train at Spean Bridge I had a chat with the local policeman, and when he learned where I had just come from, he quietly informed me that his beat extended as far west as Glen Dessarry, but that he had never been there in his life!